

SECRET DRAMA

—
ISABEL BEAUMONT



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SECRET DRAMA

BY

ISABEL BEAUMONT

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pseud.

"The envelope of flesh and blood on which our eyes are fixed melts before our outstretched hand, and there remains only the capricious, unconsolable, and elusive spirit that no eye can follow, no hand can grasp."—JOSEPH CONRAD.



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PART I

MARIE

CHAPTER I
THE MOTHER

I

HAVING placed the tray on the table, Mrs. Jesson stood, without a movement, without a change in her intense and profound expression, looking at the dishes set round the slim silver vases of roses on the white cloth. She was not thinking. She was shaking with an accentuation of the happiness which, ever since she received Marie's letter, had steadfastly endured in her. It was as if the dainty and simple things gathered in the yellow light had in some mysterious manner convinced her of the reality of her happiness. Everything seen during this interval of time which lay between her departure from America and her position of immobility here beside the table had had the vagueness, the imponderable faintness, of an illusion. But the old Spode teacups were real; the silver cake-basket, the silver spoons, thin with age, the cucumber and ham sandwiches, the honey, amber and thick in the perfect holes of the comb—they were all real.

She raised her eyes. Small, pale, moist, between triangular lids, they gazed through a window at the long snipped shadow of the woodlands unmoving, dark, on a sky without a cloud. Her lips twitched. She looked inspired, she looked as if she were contemplating some state of being,

beautiful, religious, personal, which made her heart burn and her large wrinkled hands tremble on the handles of the tray. Almost inaudibly she spoke.

“To be a mother—‘I thank the gods that have given me love and a child.’”

In her immobility, in her rapt contemplation of space, in her supreme artless sentimentality, she was dramatic, she was impressive. There was no sound of any other human being in the house nor the garden, and yet, standing there with her roughly modeled rust-red face uplifted, her lips moving as she murmured the words of Kipling underlined long ago and then memorized, she had a declamatory look as if she were testifying to a creed in the face of an immense multitude. Presently she smiled; she glanced again at the table. Had she forgotten anything? Marie always said she couldn't think and act too. It was because she was getting old. And she was excited now. But everything seemed to be on the table.

For a moment she restlessly rubbed the handles of the tray, in an indeterminate mental condition, her mind busied with the tea and yet conscious still of those bright convictions, hopes, and faiths. Then with an effort she divorced it from the world of dream on a swift remembrance of Marie's condemnation of that part of her life. “Marie knows I'm old-fashioned,” she thought, “and when I get thinking I make mistakes. And if, as she says, everything I think is wrong—well, it's only waste of time. But I can't believe that all the old things are wrong.”

Her eyes lifted in the stress of that immense perplexity, but she had altered her position a little and they looked

now not on the skyline, but at her reflection in a mirror on the opposite wall. She was immediately distracted from the problems of Victorian and Georgian morality. She walked across to the mirror. She assiduously examined herself.

Only the protuberance of her back revealed her seventy years. Her thick body was vigorous and firm. She wore a dark-blue chiffon coat and a blue silk dress, but she had fastened up the skirt when a little while ago she watered some young cabbages, and a rather short white cotton petticoat revealed not only several inches of solid leg below it, but also vaguely indicated the presence of those shapes within it. Her broad pink arms, bare from the elbow, hung at her sides. Her thick and flattened profile set between the white crispness of abundant hair, and the dim softness of her dress, with the lips forming a thin arch above the bold chin, the nose fleshy, the eyes, intent, meditative, faintly perplexed, under unconsciously angry brows, seemed to suggest her for long service, for endurance, for an unending self-immolation. She had a dauntless and stoical look as of one fitted for the rigors of life—for the demands on the body and the wounds for the spirit.

She wondered whether Marie would approve her appearance. She expected there were a great many faults she didn't see. "I'll put a little powder on," she thought.

She could not look at herself with any emotion that was not inspired by her sense of her relation to Marie. She had no interest in herself as an individual. She was important, morally and physically, only as she affected Marie's esthetical susceptibilities, her happiness, or her ideas. At this moment she positively felt Marie's black,

dispassionate, resigned eyes scrutinizing her; she unpinned her skirt and shook it down, and went out of the room quickly, with a happy admission of the redness of her unpowdered face. She smiled because it was so sweet to feel that she was obeying Marie's wishes. As she mounted the staircase she thought:

"It doesn't matter what an old woman like me looks like, but Marie thinks every one will notice me; she wants me to be a credit to her."

She was impressed by the quietude of the house. If Marie were not coming—if Marie did not exist—if she were alone! She glimpsed horror. The reality of her position made her tremble again. Marie was coming—did exist—she would never be alone. Wait a little and hear the house then, see then this brown, dumb, staring passage! She had a vision of the yellow road from Mellbury Station, the faded blue trap moving down it, and Marie, brilliant, impenetrable, careless, seated beside Johnny. There would be boxes in the hall, noise, confusion. . . .

In the open doorway of her bedroom she stopped and listened. No, there wasn't a sound on the road. How silly she was! The train had only just come in.

Without a thought, or conscious vision; moving with a sense of pervading light, light which flushed the outside world, the room, and filtered into her head and washed over the whole moral landscape of her life, she went to the dressing-table and shakily powdered her face and neck. Her heart beat quickly. She was almost frightened. The magnificent reality took shape as a picture so perfect that, contemplating it, she could not believe in its permanency.

She stared breathlessly at that vision of Marie in the garden which involuntarily her mind had offered her as a simplification of all her chaotic knowledges. Marie with her always now—fixed here, one with the life of the house, within the range of her eye, the clasp of her hand. If she moved or spoke, desolation would descend on her. Perfect passivity, a supreme caution, these alone would preserve the tenure of that picture. No, she couldn't believe in its everlastingness. Marie wouldn't stay. A few months, perhaps a year—and she would be alone again.

Her hands descended to the dressing-table and rigidly rested there. Her broad bosom stirred. Her eyes, tragically still, stared with a glassy darkness from the dry white which now rose, with a frigid and insensitive look, above her dress. She was conscious of the soundless room behind, of the house gathered about her, suddenly sinister in its hush; its apathy only superficial, full of an implacable intention, patient, assured; without turning she could see the hill, no human movement nor sound on it.

In the passage a door opened and closed. Footsteps passed her room and descended the stairs. She drew a long breath.

"I mustn't look forward," she said. "I've always tried not to, and I must try now. I must live in the present. It's the only way, if one is to have any peace at all. I mustn't think about the future. The present is very good. I'm very happy—and thankful. I won't think about what may come to me. It only frightens me—and then perhaps it don't come after all."

She laughed a little, curling and uncurling her fingers

against her dress. So for a moment she remained, moving her lips, steadily moving her fingers. Then she turned; she went out of the room, downstairs and towards the kitchen, following the light, quick footsteps whose direction she unconsciously had noted.

II

Since she left school twelve years ago, Marie Jesson had not had more than six consecutive months at home with her parents. A year traveling in Germany with a girl-friend, another year with the same friend in Scotland, six months in Ireland, two years in a flat in Kensington when she and this devoted May Bessant ran together a small art shop, living, they said, "quite indifferent to physical conditions, happy mentally among our beads and lovely old curios—Bohemian but perfectly moral"; scattered months on the east coast and under the South Downs, two years in France doing clerical work with the V.A.D., a year in America with her mother after her father's death, a year with May in London—these were some of the phases of Marie Jesson's life from the age of twenty to thirty-two. During them, or in the period when she was considering some new form of action, she came home to Rowe Green, the little village near the edge of the Weald under the shapes of the three finest heights of the North Downs—Brend Hill, Hirst Hill, and Broad Down. She never stayed longer than six months.

For that time she tolerantly received her mother's worship and submission; she subjected her mother to discipline in such matters as social deportment, suppression of indi-

viduality, and cultivation of recognized social and moral principles; she flirted with her father; she exploited her interest in the village, her democracy, her fine perceptiveness for all that was delicate, humorous, tragic, ironic, in the lives of "this class of people"; and then she withdrew in a confusion of luggage and admiring attendants, without a backward glance at that massive and stiff figure standing in its incongruous silks—Mrs. Jesson always wore silk dresses—just inside the porch.

It sometimes seemed to Mrs. Jesson that nearly half her married life had been a battle with the desolating effects of that constantly recurring scene of resignation. Until her husband's death, two years ago, she could never, whenever Marie was absent, come to the porch and look across the reedy oval of the Green without becoming sensible of a faint, insidious sadness which seemed to brood over the pale brown widths, without catching in the sensitive air some light, melancholy vibration of those times of pain, almost of despair. The illusion of Marie's presence grew stronger then. She had to turn sharply to exorcise from the whispering wild place that gay figure suspended in some familiar movement of departure and always with averted face, with eyes set inexorably on some distant goal. Never regretfully looking back, nor lingering. No, never.

Mrs. Jesson was an American. She had come to England with a party of friends when she was thirty-six, and there met Henry Jesson. She married him a year later. He was a doctor whose practice extended over Rowe Green, where he lived, and the neighboring villages of Mellbury, Hirstwood, and Brend. Mrs. Jesson adored him. In the

exaltation of her love and her conception of wifely duty she relinquished, with almost a fiery joy in her sacrifice, all idea of returning to America and her people. For she wanted to return. She never completely lost that feeling of the temporary character of her stay in England. The years passed without bringing to her any sign of a near end of life in this place; but her eyes still rested on the strong contours of the hills, the seemingly imponderable blue shade of the South Downs with its illusion, through the altering light, of placid stir, in the indestructible sense of them all as foreign, as having no claims on her fidelity, no power of inspiration nor assistance.

After thirty-four years she still felt that, spiritually, she was only camped here, and when her husband died she returned with Marie to America, passionately forcing herself to believe that she would not again touch English shores—no, not even though Marie had made the ominous demand that the house at Rowe Green should be let furnished instead of sold—passionately figuring Marie always with her, even while haunted by Marie's decisive "I shan't stop here for good, if you do. I shall be running over occasionally at least."

She did stop a year. Then she sailed for England, for London, for May Bessant. Mrs. Jesson remained, hoping, losing herself in long, formless broodings, growing daily more conscious of an awful silence and blankness. She seemed to sit for hours in a profound stillness, listening. She was always listening. She could not subdue that feeling of dwelling in the deepest parts of her nature, absolutely without communication or contact with any human being.

Her sisters and their children were with her and she loved them. Her communion with them was sweet, but—she was alone, she was in silence. How unhappy she was!

Then Marie's letter came. Marie was fired with a conception of life at Rowe Green—esthetical, calm, natural. She longed to enjoy it. Mother was to return at once and turn out the people in the house and make all ready for Marie's arrival. Marie was then flying off to Ireland with May for a final hectic time before embracing nature and the "neolithic villagers." She would be back when St. Hubert's was in order. She had quite decided to settle at Rowe Green with occasional flights into subtler and more progressive spheres. Didn't mother want to see her own daughter? Return at once.

Mrs. Jesson returned.

III

It was Miss Wilson who had gone into the kitchen. She was now in the scullery, washing out a cup and saucer. One of the taps was running and she had not heard Mrs. Jesson's entrance. She stood with her eyes fixed on the cup which she revolved in her fingers, half out of the shining water.

Mrs. Jesson on her arrival at Rowe Green had found herself confronted with two difficulties. The first was that Mr. Baird, to whom she had let the house, had bought a cottage in Somerset and was having it enlarged with the intention of moving there in six months on his retirement from business. It was not yet ready for him, and he received with consternation Mrs. Jesson's cablegram asking him to find other quarters. He waited till her arrival and

then suggested that he and his wife should withdraw to Somerset to apartments and endeavor to hasten on the alterations, while Dido his daughter and Hilda his niece remained here with Miss Hyde the companion-help, if Mrs. Jesson could spare three rooms and the kitchen. Of course the girls could go to an hotel. But—very happy here—pretty place—felt at home—and it was quite impossible to get rooms for the whole family at Blagdon. The village was full up—such a bad month August, and besides, some of the women ought to be near town.

Mrs. Jesson consented.

The second difficulty was—maids. With four rooms let, she thought she could manage with a working-housekeeper and a daily girl. After some trouble she secured Miss Wilson for the former post.

Miss Wilson had hitherto supplemented the very small income drawn from the savings of the late Mr. Wilson, by teaching in a suburban private school; but her mother's illness had forced her to give this up, and after Mrs. Wilson's death she found herself unable to obtain again even the weekly eight shillings and the daily lunch given in exchange for a concentrated attention to the mental development of thirty ruthless and unscrupulous little boys and girls through a six-hour day. She came therefore to live with a married sister at Rowe Green, almost feverishly justifying the gift of a room and food by doing most of the house-work and helping with the cooking. She had lived thus for a year. She was not happy. Her sister saw that, but was not sufficiently perceptive to discern the fundamental reason for her discontent. She imagined that Nellie

fretted because she was dependent on her sister, and, hearing of Mrs. Jesson's domestic needs, suggested, under Nellie's timid and wavering gaze, that here was a chance of independence, comfort, and at least as much ease and dignity as was allowed by the school life or the duties as "Auntie."

"You'll see plenty of people," she said. "When Mrs. Jesson's daughter gets back they'll entertain a lot. It's not a dull house."

She did not understand then, nor afterwards in her few wondering retrospects, the meaning of the dim flush which moved under Nellie's tender, slightly sallow skin; she could not name the expression with which for an instant Nellie's momentarily steady eyes rested on her own. That strange look was subdued at once, but the flush remained as Nellie said she would consider the proposal.

She afterwards agreed to it.

Now she stood at the sink, a tall, thin, stooping woman of thirty-three. She had a delicate rather pretty profile, and, in her light, worn body, in the attitude of her head, quite shapeless with the smother of its untidy brown hair, in the fold of her soft, unrestful lips, the stir of her young, conscious eyes, a look of inward agitation. Her movements appeared automatic; they were not clumsy, but they had a palpably provisional air. She had the aspect of one who conscientiously recognized the exigencies of the present, but sustained them only through the contemplation of a possible and far different future, and who endured after every hopeful dream the pang of doubt, the darkness of realities.

"Are they Miss Hammond's things, Nellie?" Mrs. Jesson asked.

Miss Wilson started perceptibly and looked round. "I didn't hear you come in," she explained, with a nervous laugh. "Yes; I've just brought them down."

"You have the kettle on for tea? I'm expecting Miss Marie any moment."

She had not moved from the doorway and one large white hand fumbled with the door-knob; she gazed beyond Miss Wilson's emotional face, at the three frying-pans hanging on nails along the edge of a shelf.

She did not see them. She scarcely saw Miss Wilson. Her mind was a blank, and her eyes blind to all concrete shapes. Marie's figure swinging to her through light—she saw only that.

"It doesn't seem like home to me until she comes," she went on. "I haven't seen her for a year. And it seems a lifetime. . . ."

She had a pause, struggling to reduce to words the shapes flashing, vague and beautiful and complex, on the fringes of her mind. She stood so long, silent, staring, absorbed, that Miss Wilson brought out weakly:

"I know what you must feel. I think a mother's love . . ."

Mrs. Jesson glanced at her as from an immense distance. "Only a mother knows what a mother feels. You'll know when you're a mother, Nellie. You don't know now."

But if she could tell Nellie! She wanted to tell, not because she cared whether Nellie as Nellie knew or not, but because she wanted to demonstrate to a human being

the singularity of the mother's state, its unapproachable wonder and mystery. She wouldn't at that moment have been anything but a mother for worlds, she thought. Tell Nellie why, her brain urged. There she is, chaste, childless; you pity her because she is these things. You hope she'll know, one day, your ecstasy, the golden chaos you're moving in. Tell her what you feel.

But she couldn't. The warm, bright scullery seemed to throb; a running flash from pewter and copper seemed to strike her eyes sharply in the intensity of her effort for self-expression. The steam from Nellie's hot dish-water fantastically deepened her sense of groping in mists. She grasped the door-knob firmly in a momentary unconscious fear of the dissolution of her physical surroundings. The touch of its cold metal calmed her. She abandoned all attempt at analysis and presentation of her feelings. If she allowed herself to get so excited she would do something silly when Marie came, and Marie did so like her to be sensible. She looked kindly at Miss Wilson.

"Don't make the tea directly you hear Miss Marie," she said. "I'll ask her if she wants it at once."

She turned away, glancing round the kitchen. She felt that it was impossible for her to hurry, or do any definite thing. She was irresistibly impelled to make these pauses while she stared from a fresh angle at the simple, trivial objects which yet had so close an association with her life, so recondite a power to stir emotion and bring her near understanding of the realities of our existence. The sight of the kitchen now, not sunny but shadowless and sharp, was like the quick run of a new stream of delight

into her rich accumulations. She thought that she loved it. The space of brown floor, the square table, the deep reds and blues of the china on the dresser, her sewing-machine, the white ceiling cleanly spread above the dunniness and emphatic colors below—they were not simple, they were intrinsically subtle and important. She almost reached the knowledge of them as being her moral supports, the ramparts which stood between her and the vast, disorderly outer loneliness, her safeguards against the feeling of pessimistic wonder and dismay. There was a flutter of memories in her head. She did become carried on to the thoughts: “It’s wonderful how these little things mean so much to us! I’ve worked myself out of many a fit of the blues at that old sewing-machine. And forgotten my sorrows for a time making pastry at that table. It’s a good thing we’ve plenty of work to do. If we sat down and let ourselves think—well, there wouldn’t be any sanity left in the world.”

She glanced back at Miss Wilson, who was polishing the cup. “It’s nice to be home again, Nellie.” She heard a sound in the hall. “Is that you, Bessie?”

“Yes, only me.”

Mrs. Jesson went into the hall.

A tall, fat old woman in black stood there. This was Bessie Hammond, a second cousin who had been living for some years in America with one of Mrs. Jesson’s sisters, and whom Mrs. Jesson had brought home to live at St. Hubert’s.

“Only me,” Miss Hammond repeated.

Out of her round, plump, yellow face her eyes stared at Mrs. Jesson. They were wide open, and this exhibition

of much discolored eyeball round faded blue glassy irises gave her a look of aching intentness, of preparedness for some event; a vigilance which was made distressing by her obvious and realized unfitness to meet any event. She bore her shapeless, soft body uneasily as if she doubted its right to a portion of space or ground; she held a basket of sewing as if the possible reproaches for having taken this basket had just occurred to her with numbing force.

In all other matters, there was nothing unusual about her. Thin brown hair lay closely to her large head and stood out at the back in a little knob. Her features were large and commonplace; her thick, pale lips looked inexpressive; under the pallor of her eyes were deep brown hollows; small brown patches flecked the moist yellowness of her skin.

“Waiting for Marie?” she enquired.

“Yes. She’ll be here any minute now. Will you have another cup of tea when we have ours?”

“Yes, please, I think I will.” Miss Hammond smiled, a softer, happier look coming into her eyes. “So kind of you. I’ll just take my basket into the dining-room. So nice to think Marie’s coming, isn’t it?”

She had moved forward and now paused, her head turned towards Mrs. Jesson, her smile lingering, her eyes attentive.

“Very nice, Bessie. I shan’t know any peace until she’s in the house.”

Miss Hammond gave a high little laugh. “So kind of you—so nice to have her. Everything’s very nice, isn’t

it?" She shuffled, smiling-lipped, her eyes burning wanly in the clear shadow she had entered, towards the dining-room.

Mrs. Jesson glanced at the clock. She moved nearer the inner hall door and gazed through its glass at the Green.

A little woman with a long, hopping walk was coming along the path which ran round to the shops. Recognizing Miss Hyde, Mrs. Jesson opened the door, went into the porch and opened the outer door.

"I'm waiting for my daughter," she said. "I don't see the trap."

She looked from eyes shaded under her palm at the road's perspective.

"Nor do I. She's rather late, isn't she? I expect you feel excited, Mrs. Jesson. I know I should. If any one's coming to see me whom I haven't seen for a long time, I'm—oh, I can't keep still. Excitement, you know. I shake all over, I can assure you I do. When it's any one you're fond of, you know, and you haven't seen them for a long time—oh, I think it's most trying. It's an ordeal. It really is."

Miss Hyde spoke very quickly and with movements of her tongue and mouth which suggested that she was dropping out pebbles. She moved quickly her little gray head in its stiff blue straw hat, her faint high brows, her interested, fair little eyes, her narrow shoulders. She was about sixty. Her glance was very bright and innocent. She looked delightedly at everything. Her pointed little face was brimmed with light; it diffused light. Most strik-

ing was her ardent endeavor to convey her sympathy, her pleasure, her contentment.

"I've just been shopping," she went on, swinging her basket, and making a gay movement on the balls of her feet. "Miss Baird and Miss Nicholls are with me. But they met some friends, so I came on. Your daughter's coming by the 5.22? I've never seen her. I didn't see her when you were arranging to let the house, you know. I'm looking forward to seeing her. I like meeting fresh faces. Here come my charges."

Mrs. Jesson slowly turned. Yes, they were there, Dido Baird and her cousin Hilda, approaching easily, Dido with her look of slight criticism, Hilda with her brown, surprised eyes faintly smiling. Mrs. Jesson shook hands with them. She said again that she was waiting for Marie, that she did not yet see the trap.

Dido said "Yes?" in her crisp, firm voice; she smiled, showing pretty small teeth between tender lips. Hilda smiled too, without losing, however evanescently, that look of mild astonishment.

What nice girls they were! She ought to be very happy, very thankful. Every one, as poor Bessie would say, was so kind. Mrs. Jesson beamed on the three faces. She began to tell them of her excitement, not looking at them after the first moment, but at the shining trees along the road. She felt them there, the three quiet bodies; and the feeling communicated to her a beautiful warmth. The world seemed full, harmoniously so. The feeling of homogeneity was precious to her. She felt strong and calm, supported, embraced.

Then Hilda, who had not yet spoken, said, her high, cool voice sounding pleased, "Isn't that the trap?"

Mrs. Jesson's heart jumped. She turned. A little square thing was coming along the road, very small, very dull on the spacious wash of yellow air under the luster of the far sky. The trap—Marie. She couldn't speak. She could do nothing but stand, gazing at the growing square, at the two lines in it which gradually rounded out. She saw the spread of Marie's large hat, the dusky pallor of her face—then the stir of eyes, the color of mouth and cheek. There were movements in the porch. Her companions were quietly withdrawing. Airily Marie waved.

Some force jerked her forward. Her throat ached and her eyes became full of tears. She heard Marie speaking, but the words did not reach her understanding. She was beside the trap now, holding up her unsteady hands. She gazed into Marie's bright, amused eyes.

"Marie—darling," she said.

Without touching the proffered hands Marie sprang down. "Hallo, mother! Why in the world did you wait out in this sun? Will nothing make you sensible? Now *don't* touch my boxes. You won't be any good; just go into the porch and *be quiet.*"

"Can't I help, darling?"

"Go into the porch and don't worry. Show a little sense, like a good woman."

Mrs. Jesson went into the porch. She watched Marie and the boy getting a suit-case down. She hadn't kissed Marie yet—nor touched her.

Patiently she waited.

CHAPTER II

THE DAUGHTER

EVERYTHING was in the hall at last and the trap departing. Marie glanced over her luggage.

“The other things came all right, I suppose?” she asked, alluding to the luggage sent on in advance. “Where have you put them? In my old room? Quite right.” She burst out laughing, looking absently at her mother. “That maniac Billy Hamilton saw me off at London Bridge. May and I met him outside the flat. He’s too lovely. He would persist in pretending to be blind-o; he was *rolling* round the station, in the way of all the most Mid-Victorian-looking females he could see—perfectly lovely!”

Mrs. Jesson laughed a little. “Have you enjoyed yourself, darling?”

“Oh, had a glorious time. Is tea nearly ready? I’ll just have a wash.”

She ran upstairs. Mrs. Jesson called to Miss Wilson to make the tea in five minutes, and then followed.

Marie went swiftly into the bedroom, threw her hat on the bed, came out and crossed to the bathroom. At its door Mrs. Jesson, who had stopped there, clasped her by the arm.

“Aren’t you going to kiss me, Marie? It’s a year since I saw you.”

Marie laughed again. “How pathetic! *There* you are!

Now are you satisfied? I want to shut this door—are you coming in or not? Do as you like, but don't stand there in the doorway."

"I'll come in."

Marie banged the door to when they had entered. She talked about the journey, May, Billy Hamilton, while with rapid, sure movements she touched taps, soap, and towel. She laughed a great deal, looking at her mother merrily, but without any sign that she saw her mother as one peculiarly intimate and privileged. Mrs. Jesson, gazing back without the smallest attenuation of her interest, felt and gently submitted to what was little more than a rejection, a hard affirmation that she was not and never could be an influential factor in Marie's life. She suffered a little as Marie's expression and manner freshly manifested this, but it was a subterranean pain discerned by her consciousness as a night, personal, discreetly hidden, far off, beyond the splendid realm of day in which she now dwelt. She laughed when Marie obviously expected her to laugh; she did not speak, because Marie did not want to hear her; she tried, with a supreme effort, to be all that Marie desired. Only—Marie's conception of the perfect mother was glimpsed by her in flashes, confusing and strange, never as an entirety. And her incertitude made her nervous. A false step on this night of their reunion! Marie irritated! the prospect affrighted her.

Marie was not like her mother physically any more than she resembled her morally. She looked younger than her thirty-two years now that her face was freshened by the water and her hair fallen again over her forehead. A mo-

ment ago when her hair had been pushed back and her face wet she had looked her age and almost plain.

She was not really pretty, but she created an illusion of prettiness by her joyous glance, her small, brilliant black eyes, and her confidence. Her black hair was charmingly arranged, and she had a strong neck, a full, firm figure, and movements which were finely definite, which had the grace of ease and lightness, a bearing which suggested a fortunate and happy mind, a complacency not obtrusive.

But there was no distinction, no fineness, in the modeling of her features, nor the shape of her head and cheeks. Her head was large and round, though she concealed this with her thick hair; her cheeks were swollen, their color, before she powdered, was purplish, and her eyes sparkled like gems set in a dull bed of flesh, the lids being thick, and full, creased pouches lying under them. Her nose, too, was long and wide-tipped, and her mouth had a sunken look, an appearance of age, the upper lip coming low over her teeth, so that when she laughed only the lower row was disclosed and a doubt of the upper row raised, to be presently dispelled by the moist thread of white gradually stretching below the flat uncurving lip.

To Mrs. Jesson, however, she was beautiful. Mrs. Jesson held out rings, brooch, wristlet watch with the air of a voluntary slave. She followed her into the bedroom, saying:

“I like that dress. It fits you beautifully. Have you been well all the time?”

“Yes, yes, yes. Where’s the powder? I left my bag in the hall. Ah! . . . Shout to that woman to make tea.

Who is she? Some village paragon? Tell me another time. I'm rabid for a cup of tea at present. We'll have it on the verandah."

"I've laid it in the drawing-room, darling. I thought it would be cooler, but if . . ."

"Oh!" Marie howled melodiously. "Of course I shall have it on the verandah. Couldn't you know I was dreaming of a camp-chair out there all the way up from the station? But you don't believe in telepathy, do you? You say you love me so much and yet you never show the slightest comprehension of my desires."

Mrs. Jesson could not answer jestingly, though she knew that Marie was jesting. "I do love you, Marie, but . . ."

"Oh, *mother*, if you can't take a joke I shan't be able to speak to you. Come downstairs and try to be intelligent."

She swung to the door, casting a glance at the passive figure and uncertainly smiling face. "That's a new dress. Quite all right if you'd get into it properly. It looks as if it's been blown on. And I see you've spilt powder all over it, and made yourself *ghastly* with the amount you've put on. Oh, how I am needed here!"

She went downstairs.

"I dare say I should get very slovenly, Marie, if I hadn't you to look after me," Mrs. Jesson acknowledged placidly. "Are you going to move the things on to the verandah, then? I'll tell Nellie to bring the big tray . . ."

"You'll go and sit on the verandah and be quiet."

This Mrs. Jesson did not want to do, but Marie thrust her into the drawing-room and closed the door on her.

She remained for an instant arrested in the stiff, indecisive pose with which she had suffered Marie's authority. She smiled, but her smile had no light nor ease. Marie was so imperious. It would have been better for Marie to rest while she herself helped Nellie, but Marie disliked her mother to do anything for her. She moved towards the verandah. No, not dislike; it was just one of Marie's notions; it was her independence: "It wasn't because I'm her mother that she didn't want me to help her."

There was a sting in that! She halted, staring through the glass verandah door at the little wedges of pale meadow slipped in between the flowing and broken woods. It wasn't tender concern for her mother; it was dislike of having any one "following her round" as she called it. And her mother was as irritating as any one else.

She saw quite distinctly that night which lay implacably beyond this already waning day. She looked rather piteously at the tea-table. "She says I've no comprehension of her desires, but I sometimes think she has none of mine."

Marie couldn't glimpse the delight with which she had laid that table, projecting her mind into the future and seeing Marie moving around the things and so achieving the right pictorial effect which would enhance Marie's charm there. Marie would demolish that effect without seeing luminous above it the glow of the mood which had inspired every fortunate idea—the nice blending of colors, the scrupulous symmetry of the whole. She wouldn't have a vision, pathetic, humorous, of the mother tremendously striving to recall past lessons in esthetics, casual revelations of opinion, that she might produce a beauty which would

draw from Marie some exhibition of pleasure, of praise, some warm expression of the joy she had in being so well interpreted.

Vaguely Mrs. Jesson felt this. She went on to the verandah clumsily as if she were moving through a cloud. Then she heard Marie laughing and the cloud melted; she involuntarily turned towards the sound, smiling.

"I can't expect her to think and feel like I do. She's young, and she's modern. You never get back what you give. She loves me, but it's not her way to show it. I ought to have thought she might like to be out here."

She looked at a camp-chair, but she felt she could not sit down. She moved about, altering the position of the rustic table, pushing chairs back, pulling others forward. Nothing stirred in the garden. The trees, the meadows, beyond the low garden fence, lay motionless and bright. She breathed the scent of hay, of broken sod, of aromatic weeds; the smell of the pond on the Green stole to her on the thick, still air. Thinking how she would hear all about Ireland and tell all about America, and Bessie, she regained that sense of peace.

CHAPTER III

NOCTURNE

I

IN their bedroom Dido and Hilda were discussing Marie. Hilda was sitting at the dressing-table taking the pins out of her hair; Dido was changing her dress.

"I like Mrs. Jesson," Hilda said, regarding herself with a mild complacency which might have been thought the principal reason for her feeling of expansiveness towards every one else.

"So do I. She's a dear. Miss Jesson, as far as I could judge, looked most unlike her."

Hilda pondered this, the faint fragrance of an invidious suggestion floating to her. Unlike physically, or morally? Dido was so sharp.

The cousins were the same age, both twenty-eight, and both looked less than that, Hilda perhaps more so than Dido since her inexpressiveness allowed her face to remain quite smooth and fresh, unmarked by emotional experience, while her large brown eyes looked out on the world with an imperceptive tranquillity. She suggested leisurely mental action in very simple and orderly realms.

Her oval, perfectly colorless face had the obtuseness of one essentially practical, incapable of response to the imaginative flights of others, dwelling satisfied and secure amid

a few concrete realities—furniture, friends, nice clothes, food, sewing—and estimating the value of a few emotional and spiritual things—friendship, enjoyment, duty—by the light of a Christianity which she accepted much as she accepted her nationality, without question or criticism.

Everything which she dimly felt to be subversive of her own conception of light and order, or which was new or singular, she acknowledged by a change in her eyes from soft blankness to an uncomprehending fixity. The darkness of her eyes in her pale face was attractive and there was something pure and beautiful in their regard. They were almost invariably motionless under high, immobile brows. Her nose was aquiline, but not thin. The severe, fine sweep of her brown hair showed the charm of a long and narrow head. As she sat now with her arms raised, her figure looked girlishly thin, and her smile when she turned to Dido was girlish too in its meaninglessness, and its suggestion that it might inexplicably be followed by a giggle.

Dido did not smile. Her narrow eyes merely rested momentarily on Hilda's face with a slight lessening of their look of happy absorption. She moved round the room vigorously, not speaking after that reference to Marie, but seeming unconscious of the silence, on her round, small face the stillness of one attending to the subtleties of an inward voice.

She was tall and fairly plump, but all her movements were rapid and light. Her neck was long, and turned frequently with a charming air of eagerness. She had blue, keen, animated eyes half concealed by thin lids, under fair brows

drawn straight and narrow above the almost childish roundness of her nose and cheeks. It was a delicate roundness, finished and harmonious, and her mouth, inscrutably close but not compressed, still, but somehow exciting a hope of immediate movement, made a narrow but tender line on its evenness. Like Hilda she had not attempted to achieve seductiveness by any coquetry of hair-dressing. Outwardly, at least, though less strongly than Hilda, she affirmed allegiance to those standards derided by Marie as "Mid-Victorian"; her brown hair was combed back from a center parting and rolled casually at the back of her head; it was untidy and rather lank; from all angles it had an undecorative and even mean appearance. And the dress she had just slipped on was not half off her shoulders, and it fell considerably below her knees. As she came to the mirror and bending behind Hilda began without interest to take down her hair she looked beautifully unconscious. She was not thinking of herself as an effective power, but as a response, infinitely varying, to the powers of others.

"Don't you like Miss Jesson?" Hilda asked.

Dido laughed. She showed her moist, small teeth, and a dimple came in each cheek; a stillness fell upon her head and face so that she seemed to be absorbed by her mirth and expectant of an answering gaiety:

"How can I know whether I like her or not? I've only seen her from the window. But I thought she looked imperious, and Mrs. Jesson was longing to kiss her and was foiled. Do you call that lovable—or likeable?"

"I suppose I don't," Hilda said. Then, after a pause, "But you may be mistaken, Dido."

"Of course." Dido's teeth were still bared, her face firm, in that expression of delight. She combed her hair roughly.

Hilda gazed at her cousin's reflection in the mirror, and Dido, observing the faint question in her eyes, recognized and gently warmed to an emotion identical with her own.

"I think I'm rather glad she's come," Hilda said.

Dido's short laugh broke out again. "So am I—awfully glad." She pushed in hairpins. "We're certain to meet her; we must be in the garden to-night. Can you look very casual, Hillie? We mustn't betray our designs."

While she was speaking she had stepped away from the dressing-table. Hilda now stood up and, looking at her, laughed with that same obscure delight. For a moment they both stood without movement, laughingly intent on each other. A faint bewilderment lay upon Hilda's inquiring brows, but Dido looked brilliantly conscious. She knew why she was laughing and why she felt ever so slightly excited. Hilda's ingenuous wonder at her own sensations extremely amused her, and a little distracted her from the principal interest. She felt that Hilda, though half the room lay between them, was touching her. She had fast hold of Hilda. She was leading her. Into what realms? There her thoughts lost lucidity. There was a splendid uncertainty about the scenes they were moving to. She caught flashes of the protagonists in them—Marie, unknown, perhaps unknowable, Mrs. Jesson, that enigmatical Miss Hammond—oh, it was glorious! And there was Hilda, steadily beaming, giggling, looking as if aware of movement and quite confounded by her own exhilaration. Dear Hilda!

"I love meeting people," Dido said.

"So do I." Hilda brought her assent out breathlessly. She looked more than ever amazed.

"And they're interesting people."

"Yes." Hilda was less emphatic here. It was not the temperamental subtleties of acquaintances which intrigued her, but their mere humanity. Of course, it was partly that with Dido. Just the sheer joy of contact with kind. Homogeneity.

And here they stood, still rooted in their expressive contemplation of each other, savoring their excitement, yielding to the mysterious drama of the moment!

"Well, are you ready?" Dido cried, laughing. "We may as well have tea even though Miss Jesson has arrived."

"Quite ready. I should think we might. Perhaps she won't want to be friendly?"

Dido stopped on her way to the door to demolish this doubt. "I think she will. She didn't look formal, and she's *forced* to be by being in the same house. You can't prance into a person in their dressing-gown morning after morning and preserve much distance."

"No, I shouldn't think you could." Hilda appeared to gaze, not without a thrilling sensation of impropriety, at the encounter suggested.

"And then we already know Mrs. Jesson," Dido went on, "and Miss Hammond. I'm fearfully curious about Miss Hammond. Is she right in the head, do you think? Why does she tell me how kind I am to her? I'm not conscious of having served her at any time!"

"She thanks me, too. I'm sure I don't know why."

They again looked at each other, silent, but communicative. Their faces were full of life, Hilda serious and yet somehow suggesting inward agitation more than Dido, whose closed lips curled upward joyously. They had forgotten tea. Brightly conveying to each other their sense of the momentum given to existence by the advent of these strangers, they still did not move, but slipped from response to the implications of speech into attentiveness to their surroundings.

A door opened, voices floated into the passage, and retreated into a room at its end. Downstairs there were vague sounds. Their glances fell away. Both looked round them.

To Dido everything seemed intensely sharp, wonderfully valuable. She had a sudden pleasure in the existence of the small table by her bed. The clock on it, the candlestick, the red volume of Dostoevsky's *House of the Dead*—at the sight of them she felt the flood of happiness in her surge profoundly—she felt shaken. How delightful it was to live amid substances each of which provided a moment for a different realization of personal existence! Getting up, reading in bed, feeling the darkness falling on one with the smell of candlewick pungent at its heart: she just touched all these states and then was recalled by the sound of running feet and placid feet descending the staircase, by Hilda's high voice, which now as so often before suggested not the sound but the vision of a cold, white, thin washing of water.

“Shall we go down?”

Dido uttered a crisp “Yes.”

They went out together swiftly, speechlessly, with curious

and intent eyes as though they walked into the heart of an immense but penetrable mystery.

II

After tea they carried camp-chairs down the garden. They sat, Hilda crocheting lace, Dido re-footing stockings, and listened to Marie's voice, rich and clear, now on the verandah, now coming through a window, now in some farther part of the garden; they heard her prolonged laughter. Occasionally Dido glanced alertly towards the house or Hilda widely surveyed it. They murmured opinions of Mrs. Jesson, and then passed to other subjects; but always there endured that deeper consciousness of life, and, for Dido, a feeling that all inanimate things had drawn nearer. As in the bedroom, so here everything seemed sharp, fresh, relevant. The sense of pressure grew obscurely in her. Earth was full, not crowded; room was allowed for free, ample movement, but there were no wastes; earth was furnished. That was it! Barrenness! She found it nowhere. There were shapes, definite or amorphous, stretching away beyond sight, shapes, orderly, essential, soft.

Looking up she saw the sprawl of woodlands over fields pale and chill, the rigid strings of hedgerows stretched out, the roofs keen and broken, and above them, above the faintly glossy screen of trees, Hirst Hill and Brend Hill arched with an aged and wan look upon the golden sky; she had an imperfect vision of concealed fields spilt over with shadow and light, smelling of hay, stretching round under Brend Hill into the yellow fog of the Sussex distances. And

no remembrance of solitudes oppressed her; her mind voyaged far out to the South Downs, darker than the dark south, to the sea set in a muttering half-moon of luster between the shore and the sky, and she was still without any sense of spaciousness. Order, precision, peace—she conceived only these. The quietude, the profound quietude—there was no sadness in it, no inhumanity. That flitting of figures across windows, and through luminous spaces of verandah and hall, that clear drift of voices—they subdued the influence of the grave land, they signed to her reassuringly; Marie's gestures, swift, effortless, Mrs. Jesson's, slow, difficult, awakened a response in her heart. Dido was happy; she was invincibly secure.

Dusk was sifting down upon the garden when at last Marie came up the lawn. Hilda glanced and then gazed again at her crochet; Dido looked straight at Marie, her knitting-needles skilfully moving. She thought:

“How well she walks! She doesn't hurry. I hate any one bustley. . . . Her features are too big. . . . What a perfectly lovely dress! Very modern. . . . I'm not going to like her. I'm sure I'm not.”

But how alive one felt, in the green brightness of the garden, under that great sky smoking over, and with this supple, confident figure advancing, flowered silk dress of orange and black splendidly lurid in the wild, low scattering of light from the west.

Marie said: “Good evening. May I introduce myself? It seems rather superfluous. I've no doubt mother has spoken of nothing but Marie—Marie—ever since she arrived. . . . This is Miss Nicholls?—how do you do?

And you're Miss Baird. May I intrude for a little while, or shall I put you out in counting stitches or twiddling that cotton round the right number of times?"

Dido laughed. "Do stay. You won't complicate anything. Nothing could distract Hilda from 3 treble, 1 chain, 3 treble. She's two people—one crochets while the other talks."

"How comfortable! . . . No, no, I don't want a chair. I prefer the grass. . . . Don't you think Rowe Green very pretty?"

"Oh, we love it."

"I'm really fearfully excited at being back," Marie went on. "I shall end my days here. I have it all mapped out. I shall have a fowl-run there, and more fruit trees there, and I shall grow to a nice respectable middle-age." She laughed very much. "I've a nice store of memories to keep me from boredom. Don't you think that's the only thing that makes old age tolerable—memories of all the hectic times you've had! My friend and I—she'll be coming down soon, you must meet her—we simply *love* to talk over our adventures; a boy we had staying with us once said he had to close his door, they were too fruity! Lovely!"

She threw back her head; her eyes sparkled so brilliantly that silvery lights seemed to move over their polished surface. Dido darted a glance at Hilda. She did not want Marie to see her silent interrogation of Hilda, but she had to communicate, however briefly and scantily, with the still figure beside her.

Hilda was staring at Marie. And looking—dear Hilda—the image of fascinated surprise, and threatening a convul-

sive but not quite easy outburst of giggles. Fruity stories! And Hilda! Good heavens! What kind of mental images were staggering about in Hilda's head?

And now this woman was speaking again (her upper lip looked flat under her broadened nose; that was ugly), and the greed of living, the greed for an inexhaustible variety of sensation, seemed like a flame in her; she lighted the garden ruddily with her dress, her eyes, her expression. But Hilda was white, beamless, still. How Dido's own limbs felt braced, her brain virile, her vision omniscient! The endless vistas opening out, shadowy, large, intricate! She was moving forward, and high up, a little urgent rapping amid the clamor of sounds in her head, were these words, "Discovery—process." How could she catch them when the physical voice of Marie went on, musical, pleased, heartless? The worry of them! They were missiles pelting her consciousness. They formed into a line: "The process of discovery—the everlasting and perpetual process." Dostoevsky. Her brain cleared. She found herself breathing more quickly as though she had been running. With a sense of mental and physical relaxation she attended to Marie.

Marie, after a rather obviously uninterested inquiry as to Dido's own esthetical sensations, had glided off to her experiences in Ireland. She talked very fluently, looking away most of the time with a little unconscious rather chilling air of being unaware of any ability in her companions other than their ability to listen to her own narration. Dido did listen, but she was not charmed beyond judgment as Marie apparently expected her to be; she criticized. Marie's manner was very sure; she seemed without incerti-

tudes of any kind; her opinion of herself had evidently crystallized and was not to be shaken, and because it was a good opinion she was easy, she talked with great enjoyment. Her enjoyment, Dido admitted, was partly because she loved talking, but primarily it arose out of the certitude of her own effectiveness in the scenes she described. Sitting there, pulling the short grass, gazing gleefully before her, laughing, she seemed to be contemplating a mental picture of herself and with swift, vivid strokes to be presenting the full splendor of that picture to her audience. Life—and what Marie Jesson had made of it—that was her demonstration.

Dido decided this very quickly. She resolved with some sharpness that one day she would try to shake that confidence; she would try to present Marie to herself in another light. This intimation that Marie had been so charming, so witty, so invariably predominant—the conceit of it! Dido felt herself hardening. But she would not begin the assault yet. At present her intuitions were too few. And, also, she was interested. She was willing to listen to Marie, to subdue her own desire to talk and reveal her own individuality, that she might learn more and discover vulnerable places where, one day, she would dart a sting.

She sat upright, her little, quiet face slightly tilted backward, her eyes a straight, faintly glinting line below dropped lids, and their gaze fixed, as was her habit, not on Marie's face but on Marie's neck. She always listened like this, with her disconcertingly steady look forced down, and she said "Yes" in a level, clear voice at the more emphatic of Marie's assertions.

Marie was describing the life of one Irish family. "I like that man's books," she said, mentioning a young modern Irish novelist, "but he only sees one side of the picture. He paints it all darkly, and the Irish people aren't miserable; they're happy. This family was the *jolliest* one you could meet. They were desperately poor, but they had the *joie de vivre* as much as any lot of people I've met. They all slept in one room, but they were perfectly moral. They're the most moral people, you know. Have you met any Irishmen?"

Her careless glance came to Hilda, who shook her head, her folded lips stirring a little, her beautiful head, as she moved it, somehow seeming to convey nun-like rejection of all that could possibly emanate from Marie's round, fluffy skull.

"Oh, yes, we have," Dido interposed. "You remember Mr. Mac, Hilda? He wasn't a peasant," turning to Marie, "he . . ."

"Oh, yes. I met a perfectly charming peasant boy down there. He was delightful. I used to talk to him about himself, draw him out, you know—and he wasn't used to being treated as a human being. He quite worshiped me because I recognized that he was human and had feelings and—and ambitions. Oh, he was perfectly charming. He had the most beautiful nature. He was a real gentleman. You know, I think one man's as good as another; I don't judge a man by his coat; I'm a democrat. This boy *was*, in all the essentials, a gentleman. He used to talk to me and tell me all his dreams—a charming child. He'd have done *anything* for me."

She looked at them now, pressing them with the fact of her incomparable tact and appeal. Her glance was no longer absent. She scrutinized them, measuring, probing. Her face looked suddenly intent, though she maintained her light attitude.

Dido said "Yes" in the same affirmative, unemotional tone. She continued to study Marie patiently. She wanted to be perfectly impenetrable; she longed, not angrily, but maliciously, to baffle Marie, to make her chagrined. But she was younger than Marie and far less experienced. Marie's maturity and subtlety became very apparent to her as she watched. She suddenly seemed to be certain of nothing about Marie. She was gazing at a perfectly composed and natural face, at unreadable and, she felt with annoyance, tolerant, wise eyes. Marie seemed to be observing her from the depths of a vast experience, kindly, interestedly. Her cheeks reddened a little. Her satisfaction was marred. She felt that it was, though she did not attempt to discover why. The thing she was most clearly conscious of was that she wanted to talk, to be brilliant, to assert herself. It was as if a ghost had risen up before her and she wanted to lay that ghost at once—irrevocably. And she couldn't speak! She thought she must be sitting, stiff, staring, like an image. Something inside her seemed positively to dance with impatience.

Marie was turning her head slowly away. She looked dreamily.

There was a slight stir from Hilda. "Did you like America?" Hilda asked.

Dido gazed at her. She had a gently amused perception

of Hilda's serenity. This was followed by a feeling of awakened vigilance. She glanced back at Marie with the idea of Marie as inimical, destructive. She would not have Hilda browbeaten and extinguished. She thought: "She doesn't think either of us of any account. She'll laugh at Hilda—she'll ridicule her as old-fashioned. I won't have Hilda give herself away."

"Oh, I loved it," Marie was saying. "So many things there are better than here—their elementary education is *splendid*, and then their middle-class wives: you never see a woman run out there with a shawl over her head or *dingy* or untidy. . . ." She had a pause, her expression changing into deep merriment and her face indefinably altering; it became sensuous; now she looked old and puffy.

Dido stared hardly at her, she spoke resolutely: "We haven't been to America. We . . ."

Then Marie looked at her and she felt thrust back, silenced. She was not real to Marie except as she was a member of the gallery to whom Marie played radiantly. "Oh, no," Marie acknowledged the remark. "You must go. You'll like it. You've been here two years, haven't you? How *have* you preserved your sanity! I can't stay more than six months in any place. I have to move then; I feel the call. It's the Wanderlust. The experiences Miss Bessant and I have had! Perhaps you don't like tramping, or roughing it? Sleeping under a haystack, you know! I am quite indifferent to physical conditions, I live mentally. I've lived on twelve shillings a week and been riotously happy. I bet a man I would. Miss Bessant joined me and our united expenses were twenty-four shillings weekly. I lost

stones, but it was one of the happiest times of my life. I must tell you all about it one day. I'm quite determined that when I'm tired of this—— I *love* it now, but I shall get tired of it, though mother thinks I'm settled down now for ever with her! Most uninteresting! But she'd fret herself to skin and bone if she thought I meant bolting in a few months, so I don't undeceive her. But when I'm ready for a change I'm going to have one room in town and a tame rat. I love animals. And rats hardly cost anything to feed. It would be lovely."

Hilda's young, simple laughter broke out; admiringly she gazed at Marie. Dido laughed too, but she looked at Hilda tenderly and soberly. She envied Hilda her beautiful lack of egoism. She knew that Hilda was still glad, was more than ever glad, that Marie had come. She had not, in the bedroom, been stimulated by the prospect of an exchange of perceptions; she had not looked forward to disclosing her own character as well as being privileged to watch the disclosure of another's, and therefore she was not disappointed. To sit silent, passive, apparently dull, and allow Marie to fulfil all her deliberated intentions innocently to react to Marie in the desired way—Hilda could do that and be happy. She looked beamingly happy now.

Dido returned to Marie a little pensively. She had ceased to feel sharp and militant. She felt lonely. From coherent thought she relapsed into a quiet, vague musing. Marie was rather attractive; her eyes were so pretty; she had the charm of maturity. Not that Dido herself and Hilda were young girls, but their lives had been conventional, simple.

Nothing moved. Now the light was a shrinking gauze above the Brend Hill. Without a sound, without a flaw, the garden, the motionless, still, bright level of the Green, the dark hills eternally staring at the Weald buried and dumb, lay round her, and impressed her with the feeling of a vast and shadowy expanse. The immobility seemed without limit in space or time. She breathed so gently that she could not see her bosom stirring. There was no flicker of stars, no floating of cloud. The house was dark and seemed fixed without occupants, heavy and inert. She gazed at it, and the image of Mrs. Jesson drifted across her mind—tall, ponderous, with square white head and a stealthily stirring blur of hands on a dim dress, with inscrutable eyes gazing intensely.

Blocked against the smooth, chill sky the house stared at her. It was seen suddenly as full of mystery and portent. She forgot Hilda, she forgot Marie. She was aware profoundly of the gathering darkness, the low burning of coppery light behind the bulge of Brend Hill, the creep of light along the ground weak and dying; and she was aware of the house. Mrs. Jesson was in it and Miss Hammond, and Miss Wilson with her nervous lips and listening aspect—they moved, lonely separate figures, through the warm rooms. She saw them, touched them, but she did not know them. Under her eyes and within reach of her hand they could yet melt from her—or could suddenly respond to her seeking and blind her with the full revelation of their hearts and minds.

She stared so intently at the broad bulk that the dusk stirred like the wheeling of wings. A deep hopefulness and

content settled upon her. She remembered Marie again, and fancied that cautiously she and Marie were revolving round each other, never touching, but soon to be converging to some point of contact. The small excitement quickened her heart a little. She had again a sense of momentum—in the house was movement, swift, noiseless, dramatic. Unutterable tension! She stiffened. Those figures, placidly posturing, were full of concealed action; through the unmoving, hot, physical air swirled a strong wash of emotion. And she was caught in it! It would—it did—beat round her. Miss Hammond's large, yellow face gazed with a terrifying preparedness, an unfathomable meaning, from piled darkness; Miss Wilson's pale eyes looked down startled, wide open, at some magnificent possibility; Mrs. Jesson. . . .

Marie was laughing, gesticulating, her broad, white arms intensifying the darkness. The whole regard of the blind house was on her. Stolidly, apathetically, it waited. Marie would give the sign.

Large stars were in the sky, unsteady as if a slow breath moved over those spaces, bloomed and dark like a grape. At the eastern side of the house above the flat rim of sunken fields the full, yellow moon rose, floating up an ashen breast. The three hills broke in long, swift shapes into a scattering of stars. In one of the windows of the house a light appeared, the wavering, small light of a candle. Visible movement at last—the wan flicker in the hollowness beyond the window, the light shake of the stars, the glide of the moon upward.

Dido remembered that Miss Hyde was then preparing

supper. She thought of the room, the circle of soft red light, the books, and the white walls. She bent her head and her gaze sank and rested on the grass. The influence of the house stole to her; it enwrapped her; she heard the light stir of sound in it, the stir of life. Life! How wonderfully lovely it was to be alive, to be surrounded by living creatures!

She became without thought, seduced away into a dreamy stillness.

III

They all stood up at last, and Dido and Hilda folded the chairs. Marie watched them, her arms lifted and bent, her finger-tips softly pressing each other, stirring; her attitude gracefully supple. She smiled as if she liked them, as if she were momentarily arrested by them. She said to Hilda:

“What are you making?”

“A camisole top,” Hilda replied, her open, smooth eyes dwelling on Marie. “I like crochet. I do a lot. It’s quite simple.”

“It’s a pretty pattern.” Marie gazed at Hilda thoughtfully, and Dido almost with brusqueness interposed to withdraw Hilda from scrutiny, from an analysis which could not be sympathetic nor appreciative.

“We have an informal Beehive out here sometimes. Miss Bennett comes—I suppose you know her—and she’s crocheting a jumper, and we all work and discuss the burning questions of the hour—Spiritualism, and Psycho-Analysis, and the Decline of the Drama. We are fearfully highbrow.”

“You must be! I’ll join you one evening.”

They went down the garden together, Marie stating her knowledge and opinion of Miss Bennett, Dido searching her memories for interesting or admiring men. She wanted to show that she too had met men and received attention. Marie seemed to have innumerable encounters to relate! She had impressed every man she met.

They parted on the verandah without her having found any sufficiently relevant story, Marie entering the drawing-room and the two girls going round to the porch.

"I like her, don't you?" Hilda said. "I think she's very nice."

Hadn't Hilda any vanity, any desire to shine herself?

Dido gave a derisive little laugh. "I think she monopolized the conversation to the point of bad form. She thinks she's very nice, certainly. I never met any one with a better opinion of themselves. You're so charitable, Hilda. Didn't her conceit disgust you?"

"I didn't notice it. I liked her. She had so much to say."

"She did! . . . I'm just going into the kitchen to see what kind of fish the man left."

Hilda, baffling in her perfect blankness, went upstairs without further speech. Dido entered the kitchen.

Miss Hyde and Miss Wilson were there together, Miss Hyde frying plaice at the gas-cooker, Miss Wilson leaning against the table, talking to her.

On Dido's entrance Miss Wilson made a spasmodic step forward. She moved her head and lips a little. "I must go," she said. "I was talking to Miss Hyde while Edith washed up the dinner things."

Edith was the daily girl.

“Don’t you go because Miss Baird’s come in,” Miss Hyde said. “She won’t mind. As long as I don’t let my mind get distracted she doesn’t mind my talking. I like to talk. I can work the same time. It doesn’t put me out. I can talk and look after my fish both the same time. I can. I don’t get flustered.”

She had turned round from the gas-stove and was staring from Dido to Miss Wilson and from Miss Wilson to a tray of tea things, with a radiant little glance. She did not allow Dido time to reassure Miss Wilson, but chattered on with incredible speed and delight. “Don’t you go, Miss Wilson. It doesn’t hinder me. I like to hear you talk. We’ve had a nice chat. I’ve enjoyed it. I don’t see why you should keep to your scullery—well, you use it as a kitchen now I’ve got this one, but it is the scullery—I don’t see why you should be stuck there and me here and not dare to come in. I don’t. I said to Mrs. Jesson—I said, ‘I hope you don’t mind Miss Wilson coming in and talking to me,’ I said. ‘Only,’ I said, ‘it won’t hinder me, and I think it’s good for people to mix. I don’t think it’s good to be too much by yourself. You get mopey. I’m sure it’s not good.’ Oh, I told her so. I wasn’t afraid, and she quite agreed. She was awfully nice. I like her. She was most kind.”

Under her high, innocent little brows her eyes smiled at them, happily, but when they surveyed Dido, with a faint shadow of unconscious appeal; she seemed then to be making admissions and entreating forbearance; upon her enjoyment then there seemed to have crept the subduing knowledge of her age, her home-made clothes, her comparative loneli-

ness, and Dido's youth, prettiness, and good fortune. The next moment, as her gaze traveled round the kitchen and back to Miss Wilson's long, sunken body, she gave a little jerk of pleasure, the light of her odd, small face almost seeming to exist round her visibly, brushing that part of the kitchen's gaslight with a silvery gleam.

"Of course you needn't go, Miss Wilson," Dido said. "I only came in to see if the plaice were all right. They're quite fresh then, Miss Hyde?"

Miss Hyde scarcely intelligibly poured out a recital of bright-red spots, a new man with a dreadful criminal face, a smelly turbot, and one and fourpence a pound. Miss Wilson, resting against the table again, looked at Dido. She smoothed the table with her palms. Her attentive eyes were quiet and dilated in her soft face.

The fish spluttered noisily. Behind Miss Hyde's constantly stirring head a row of aluminum frying-pans hung like frigid moons. One of the brown kettle-holders hanging with them from the mantelpiece was touched when she turned jerkily and it swung for a little while, the only moving thing among the stiff shapes in the room. Miss Wilson presently looked away from Dido and fixed her eyes on this kettle-holder.

There was no congruency between the prosaic, shabby thing and her brooding and emotional stare. She looked full of feeling. Her brown hair had a collapsed appearance; desolately it straggled in a long fringe on to her collar. It was a high muslin collar with a wide frill of white lace round it, and her neglected head, her slender creased neck, her melancholy profile, rose out of the frill with all their

pathos heightened. She wore an apron, but this was the only sign of service Mrs. Jesson required. It was not enough to destroy the feebly festal air of the frill, the blue muslin jumper stretched without fold, without grace, on her round back, the black velvet ribbon clasping her throat, and the frills falling over her unquiet hands.

Beyond her lay the window, its casement divisions uncurtained and thrown open. Soft, indefinite masses loomed up there, masses of bush and hayrick and hedges all gathered in the fog now steaming up, dank and miasmatic, and dulling the lower stars, smearing the weeds in the ditches and the woods on the fields' rim.

Her restless eyes left the kettle-holder. She stared into the darkness. On and on ran Miss Hyde's voice. Across the passage Marie, in the drawing-room, was laughing. How Marie was laughing!

Dido, irresistibly impelled, diverted her eyes from Miss Hyde's flat bosom and turned them towards the door. Miss Hyde pattered to the gas-stove and peered into the frying-pan.

"Doesn't that sound cheerful?" she said. "I like to hear any one laughing. It makes me feel bright. I don't like to feel dull. I think she's so bright. I've only spoken to her for a few minutes but I like her. Jolly, I call her."

"She seems very nice," Miss Wilson said, turning her back on the night and nervously regarding Dido. "But it's easy for some people to be bright. I mean—some people have more chance of happiness than others. Everything goes smoothly with them, and of course they're bright, they're attractive—they—they've got all they want—every-

thing seems a joke to them—they—they don't have disappointments to bear."

She plucked at the table's edge. Her mouth had grown shapeless, and, striving to compose it, she stared blindly at the floor of the passage beyond the open door. Her head quivered and the slight movements of her neck disturbed the flaccid extension of the frill; it trembled along its irregular edge.

A gentle vibration passed through Dido. She gazed at Miss Wilson, and answered her, conscious all the time of the steady, yellow gaslight, Miss Hyde arrested over the frying-pan in a disturbed stare, Marie's laughter.

"Of course. One doesn't always feel so festive. I suppose there's some credit in being jolly when you've nothing to make you, though!"

She must laugh to round off that inept reply. She didn't know how to answer Miss Wilson. What was it she ought to say? Tragical person, standing there in those *ghastly* clothes! What was wrong with her? So Marie was an influence here as well. Nothing was quite the same since Marie's arrival, not even here. How impossible it was to enter into the feelings of this class of people! They were so crude. How melodramatic Miss Wilson looked. Poor little thing.

Very softly Miss Hyde gazed at the other woman. "Oh, that's very true. There are times when you feel so bright you could do anything, and at other times you're so dull you don't know what to do with yourself. Every one's like that. At least that's my experience. You'll find Miss Jesson has her dull times. You see."

She had, while speaking, become again so aware of the delights of this exchange of opinion that her look of sympathy, of solemnity, had been evanescent. She ceased to regard Miss Wilson; with a lamentable difference from Miss Wilson's bowed and tragic head, she positively jiggled up and down on her large feet, she nodded her peaked gray head, her brows astir and emphatic.

"You see. We all have our disappointments. . . ."

Miss Wilson lusterlessly glanced at Dido and away again. "I know. But some people feel more. I mean, there are sensitive people who feel things that others are too—perhaps I oughtn't to say it"—she laughed with an effort—"too thick-skinned to notice. And the more you feel the more you seem to have to put up with. People don't think you have feelings. I've nothing to say against Miss Jesson. She was very nice to me. Of course it's nice to hear her laughing. I dare say she's happy. She looks happy . . . very nice . . . jolly. . . ."

Her voice died away. Her struggles for an air of detachment, of ease, were almost dreadful. Her other desire to fling something at them, boldly, impressively, something whose nature they could not determine, was no less visible. They did not speak. Marie was no longer laughing and they stood in silence, in a little square of strong light between the darkness of the unlighted passage and the discreet kindling of the moon-haunted night. Without expression Dido looked at Miss Hyde.

Miss Hyde's sallow wedge of face was dulled. Her eyes were quite still. They were not fixed on Miss Wilson, but on a space of the opposite wall. Her hands, spread flatly

on the front of her skirt, looked as if struck with sudden stiffness. The perfect immobility of her small body was distressing because it was unnatural. She seemed fixed in the contemplation of some truth. Her eyes were grieved; they were full of an involuntary reproach. Streaked disks of color began to burn on her cheekbones.

She spoke in a subdued voice, turning her head aside; the tone, the movement, both suggesting a desire to escape scrutiny, a sudden perplexed doubt as to the wisdom of her past expansion.

“Yes, that’s true. She looks happy. Yes.”

Their glances, guarded, doubtful, swept Dido’s face and were withdrawn.

Miss Hyde examined the fish. “Nearly done.”

Dido, in her discomfort, caught at the information. “I’ll go and wash my hands; then. We shall be down at once, Miss Hyde.”

She smiled at them both and went out.

What in the world did it all mean—Miss Wilson’s agitation and rambling statements and forlorn looks, Miss Hyde’s sudden stark silence in the face of a shattering idea—their mutual distrust of herself? All enigmatical. The steady, swift flowing of an emotional and secret life was audible to her. She almost looked on the dark surface of it. But she did not understand. Those two women, left now in their self-created silence, were at an immeasurable distance from her, mysterious, provocative, impenetrable figures! How little she knew the people she lived with! What tremendous storms burst at her side, and the chances against her hearing one detonation were uncountable! But she had percep-

tion of the existence of Miss Wilson's lurid reveries, and Miss Hyde's sudden apparitions. Exciting, astonishing, and all generated out of Marie's arrival.

How quiet the house was!

The most desirable and engrossing place on earth at that moment was the house. She went through the shadows and weak sprawls of light on the staircase with the sure, firm step of a supreme content.

IV

They saw no more of Marie that night. Their sitting-room was at the front of the house, overlooking the garden and the high road from its eastern window, and having from the northern a view of the Green and Hirst Hill and Broad Down. They could not, therefore, see what happened on the verandah which faced west. Much was happening on the verandah, they decided. If Marie was not visible she was very audible. They heard her laughter, her imperious speech, her resolute step; Mrs. Jesson's voice; bumpings, rustlings, thuds. Their own conversation died away. They sat at the table, Dido gazing at the flowers there, Hilda amazedly intent on the door, almost foolish in her continual smiling perplexity.

From the fragments of speech they caught and the character of the noises, they could only think that Marie was transporting her bedding to the verandah. She was going to sleep out.

This was so. Miss Hyde told them later that Miss Jesson had erected a camp-bed on the verandah. Miss Hyde,

peering zestfully from the shelter of the rose pergola, had seen Marie sitting on the bed in a black-and-yellow dressing-gown, her position revealed by the friendly light of a candle which stood on a table by the bed. Mrs. Jesson reclined in a camp-chair near her.

The two girls as they went upstairs could hear the mother and daughter talking. When they entered their room they heard more clearly still, through the small casement window in the western wall, Marie's cadenced and unhalting voice. Glancing out of the window they saw the unsteady, blown space of light shifting on the gravel beyond the verandah.

"It's foggy too!" Hilda exclaimed.

"Intensely modern," Dido stated.

"And it would be noisy, I should imagine. Supposing the horses come in like they did the other night!"

They looked at each other and irresistibly laughed.

"It will be only one more hectic night added to her experiences!" Dido cried. She threw towels over her arm. "I shall be out in ten minutes," she said, alluding to her bath.

She went out, and padded down the passage, a tall, subtly virginal figure in her pink dressing-gown.

Beyond the reach of that merry voice, she thought the house seemed very quiet. There was a line of light under Miss Wilson's door, but no sound to betray Miss Wilson's presence in the room. Halfway down the passage a ghostly lividness lay on the more definite outline of the ceiling and wall—the weak light flowing through the uncurtained bathroom window across the room.

As she neared it a door a little beyond it opened and Miss Hammond, fantastically splashed with light and shadow from the candle she carried, came out and with a dragging movement approached Dido.

She wore a long nightgown and very large dark slippers; her hair was loose but fell back mistily from her uplifted face, a swollen face quite colorless and humid where the light was on it but receding into deep shadow; her eyes were not visible, only the hollow blackness of their sockets.

Involuntarily Dido paused.

Miss Hammond came up, staring rigidly. She shifted the candle, and the white of her eyeballs stirred.

"I thought it was Mrs. Jesson at first," she said, smiling, "but it's Miss Baird."

"Yes. I'm just going to have my bath. Did you want the bathroom? I can easily wait."

"No, I don't, thank you. I'm just going downstairs to get my biscuits. I forgot them. So silly of me." Looking straight before her she stepped past Dido.

"Can I get them?"

"No, thank you. I can get them." She turned her head towards Dido and stood still. Her swollen, sickly face was without expression, her eyes lay with a peculiar white clearness in the brown pits above the arch of her cheeks.

Dido, smiling at her, had a sense that something was impending. She felt a little bewildered. Again she doubted Miss Hammond's perfect sanity.

Then Miss Hammond smiled. She moved closer; in a soft, secret, not quite agreeable voice and with a steady, wan stare she said: "I'm afraid I give you all a lot of anx-

iety. So good of you to look after me. I feel so safe with all the good friends round me.”

She stopped speaking, but she did not move away. Her words had been affirmatory, but there was no assurance in her intent eyes, no sign of an invincible security in the bearing of her thick body, her immobile head. She held the candle without a quiver; she waited, with an illusion of suspended breath, of a mental as well as physical immobility.

Dido's bewilderment and curiosity deepened. For a moment she did not answer, and in that moment, her perceptiveness unworried by any sound or any movement, she divined the tense, the supreme, suspense of the old woman before her. It was inexplicable to her, but that it existed was for the time sufficient. She answered without hesitation.

“Not at all. I'm afraid I don't do much for you, but if there's anything I can do . . . I shall be pleased.”

Miss Hammond said instantly: “So kind of you. I'm so thankful. I feel so safe. What a lot of kind girls there are!”

She smiled. Tranquilly she walked to the top of the staircase. She stretched out her hand and spread it flatly on the wall, with great caution she began the descent. Dido saw her profile, thick, impassive; her gaze, still expectant and prepared. Slowly the staircase rose above her until only the even wall met Dido's eager look.

How still the house was now, and how apparently commonplace!

“Most extraordinary set of people!” Dido thought mer-

rily, taking long strides to the bathroom. "She *must* be a little cracked. Every one seems to be laboring under delusions or obsessions. Most interesting."

As she dived into the bathroom there was a sudden emission of sound from the rooms beneath, hurried, bright, excited sound; Mrs. Jesson speaking in a happy voice, Marie shouting, Miss Hammond squeakily protesting in a kind of amicable desperation—jolly! jolly!

Oh, that was what Miss Hyde would say! Dear Miss Hyde! Dear all of them!

She banged the bathroom door to with a sudden urgent desire to affirm her own existence, her presence, in the house. And the sound cracked splendidly on this layer of local quiet. Dido laughed.

CHAPTER IV

LETTERS

I

DIDO BAIRD had, at twenty-eight, the mental, moral, and physical freshness of a young girl. She was charming, but it was a less arresting and habitual charm than Marie's. She was simpler, and in her conversation and movements and expression there was not the fullness which made Marie seem so brimming with experience. With Dido one came often upon blanknesses, but Marie produced ever for the inquiring mind what was almost an excess of activity. Next to her Dido seemed only partially to have lived, to be living.

But she was both vital and intelligent. She lived fully every moment of her life. It was merely that the moments were innocent and simple, the good, charming, sheltered moments of a young girl dwelling under the gaze and within the careful control of her parents. Dido loved her parents; she had a clear, inflexible creed of filial, religious, and social duty. At twenty-eight she limpidly presented her heart, her mind, to her mother and father, she was modest, chaste in instinct and thought, delighted by admiration, but happy when she was without it. Social questions interested her, but she unconsciously differentiated herself and her family from the people whose material conditions seemed so dreadful to her. She could not grasp the fact of identities and parallels in their natures and her own: she accommodatingly

imagined them as being less perceptive, less sensitive, than herself that she might retain her feeling of joyous ease in the midst of their palpable difficulties, and when, therefore, the illusion she had created round them was broken and the real personality revealed momentarily to her and then lost through her imperfect response, she was captured, she was engrossed, she dreamed of a state of sympathetic insight which was quite possible and which would surely intensify the charm of existence.

Most of her views on life were theoretical. She had only met people who temperamentally and morally resembled herself, people, cultured, agreeable, altruistic, who lived by the orthodox conventions, who had immovable ideals of conduct, whose morality was based on the Pauline tenets. Dido did not analyze herself thus, she analyzed other people far more than herself; she was not egotistical. Books, music, art, the drama, acquiescing in the judgment of her parents, going to church, teaching little boys Bible stories on Sunday and cricket on Thursday, walking, tennis, talking, loving and admiring and smiling at Hilda—this was life for Dido.

Opportunities for loving and tenderly laughing at Hilda had been given constantly only during the last three years. Before that time Hilda—motherless since she was six—had lived with her father and three maiden aunts in a suburb of south-west London. When Mr. Nicholls died Hilda came to the Bairds'.

She was far less modern than Dido; she read less and thought less. She stood, the product of those suburban women's care, their incorruptible dogmas, their unconscious

deficiencies, their infinitesimal concerns. She had been matured by her father in nothing but patience and resignation, qualities unnaturally strong in her, through his selfishness, his perfunctory affection, and his consistent neglect. She could not love him with any feeling of joy, her love for him could only wound her in its unfruitfulness; she could not fervently love those three dry, virtuous old women; she began to live emotionally only when she came into the bright, animated zone of Dido's personality. She loved Dido. She dwelt, mildly, ecstatically contemplative of Dido's mental flights, her physical prowess, her allusive verbal displays. She did not understand, she could not mentally accompany, Dido, but she loved her.

II

Mrs. Jesson threw off the single sheet which covered her and sat up in bed. She looked round the room, vacantly.

The bridge party at Mrs. Everett's last night had made her so late for bed that she had not troubled to take her hair down and put it in its usual curl-papers. The pads she wore protruded with a dissipated and negligent air from the end of one sunken roll, her hair-net clung to her moist brow, her sleepy, half-closed eyes looked old and good amid the heat, rouge, and powder of her big face. She yawned. Her fat white arms lay on the counterpane, the yellowish hands loosely curled; there was something suave and tender in the thickness of her body solid under the scanty nightgown, something impressive and touching in her bulk and strength.

The morning was very warm, very still. She became aware of this with a feeling of pleasure. She got out of bed, stood undecided on the rug for an instant, the elementary garment floating round her massive legs, and then sat down on the edge of the bed and for a little while thought only how pleasant the warmth was, silkily stroking her skin.

Gradually she awakened. The deep quietude, the unending peace, the blandness of the entering air seduced her into a perfect physical lethargy. Nothing stirred. Nothing was awake. She could sit here, like this, for a long time yet. She could muse over and make coherent the different thoughts and feelings which had flashed on her last night.

A motionless, extensive white figure with eyes like dark little flames burning with life, she began to think.

“Marie looked very pretty last night. She knows how to dress. No one looked like her. She’s so artistic. I should never have thought of venturing on a dress like that. I should have said it was showy—those great stripes; but I’ve no taste—not till I see a thing on. I can’t imagine an effect. I could see when it was on how beautiful it looked. When I was young we always said pink for brunettes and blue for blondes, but she can wear blue. She looked beautiful.”

She had a long pause, her eyes moving round in her unmoving head, her fingers noiselessly tapping the bed.

“I didn’t like to see her with Mr. Lucas. I know I’m very silly. It’s only natural that all men should be attracted by her, but I don’t like to see her—even in the same room—or—or anywhere near a man like that.” Her fingers tapped faster, her nostrils dilated. “I’m old-fashioned. No

one thinks anything of things like that nowadays. I don't want him in the house. I feel—it's a contamination—to have my Marie, so pure—and beautiful—and good—near that man and all the dirt he's passed through."

She reared her disorderly, vigorous head, her broad feet stirred.

"Mr. Ainger talked to her a lot too.

"I must prepare myself for losing her. I can't wish her anything better than a happy marriage—with a good man—even though all the light goes out of my life the day she tells me she's engaged. I mustn't be selfish. I know I think too much of what I want, not of what's good for her. I mustn't. Marriage—wifehood—motherhood—it's the only life for a woman. I would give it to her.

"But not Mr. Ainger. I know there's no danger with Mr. Lucas. I haven't seen the man yet I would give her to. No one's good enough."

Softly a door was opened along the passage. She heard the pad of slippers past her door. At the same time she heard sounds in the kitchen, distant, faint.

"I must dress," she thought.

She stood up and, without further mental activity, but with a feeling that life was becoming increasingly momentous, painful, sweet, put on her dressing-gown and went out to the bathroom.

Later, when she had returned and was doing her hair at the dressing-table, she thought again of the bridge party. She mechanically parted and rolled and pinned her hair while all the time gazing at Mrs. Everett's ancient drawing-room—at Marie, indolent and splendid in a blue-and-gold

chair, sweepingly moving her bare arms, turning her black, round, charming head with a peculiarly somber effect in the bright lamplight under the low-beamed ceiling; she saw Marie's narrow, sparkling stare given superbly to Tommy Lucas, to Jimmy Ainger, to Mrs. Everett, sometimes with a momentary incredulous wonder to Dido and Hilda, hardly ever to herself.

Mrs. Jesson paused, as Marie had done, when mentally she surveyed the cousins.

"Very nice girls," she thought. She tried to remember Dido's dress, to catch the quite strong effect Hilda had had on her, but their figures grew loose and thin, they faded ineffectually before the flaming reality of Marie. No one had seen, completely and distinctly, anything but Marie.

She dressed in a kind of dream, stiffly clasping and arranging things, while she gazed at the oak paneling dark along the distempered walls, the bending attitudes of the men, the dim hangings in the high niches of the windows, the fascinatingly natural and firm movements of that one observed figure, Marie's.

Upon that dream intruded gently a consciousness of voices on the verandah—Marie's voice.

Her movements were accelerated. In a few minutes she was going, without thought, with a supreme hopefulness, to the verandah.

III

Quietly she opened the drawing-room door and stepped into the room. The glass door which led to the verandah

was open and she could see Marie, and, in a camp-chair beside her, Dido.

Marie was still in bed, but only half reclining; she was supporting herself on her elbow and she held before her lips a large, shallow cup of tea. Her hair, still in last night's coils, was very much disturbed and had sunk heavily to the nape of her broad neck; on the wide crown of her head it looked flat and damp. Her features also looked damp and her face flashy and reddened, but her lustrous eyes gazed across the cup at Dido with a perfectly awake and nimble air; she was not drinking the tea, because of her absorption in something she was telling Dido.

On the table beside her was a tray, an acetylene lamp, a box of chocolates, and a book. Above these things rose the shoulders and fresh, attentive face of Dido, who, wearing a sports coat and carrying a stick, seemed to have just returned from an early walk.

Neither of them had noticed Mrs. Jesson and she did not at once go to them. She stood, slowly amassing the details of the scene, her heart responding to the influence of each separate thing her eyes or her mind observed.

Marie was speaking to Dido without a pause, with much animation, but her voice was low, and in the enthusiasm of her most emphatic points she did not raise it. Mrs. Jesson could not distinguish any of her words. She saw only that Marie, who had been home but four days, was confiding something to Dido, admitting her to the intimacies of her feelings, her thoughts; she drank tea hurriedly and then went on in her rapid, repressed tones, not looking very much at Dido, looking radiantly ahead most of the time,

but occasionally giving Dido a bright, pressing glance—a glance which said, “Well, what do you think—what do you think? This is me—how are you going to take me?”

A keen pain stabbed through Mrs. Jesson’s heart. Her lips parted in the sudden pain of her jealousy. She was rendered quite incapable of movement. Not once during these four days had Marie spoken to her like this, baring herself, awaiting, with however much confidence, judgment. Not once had she exhibited this ease, this leisureliness, this air of liberation. With her mother she had been terse, she had been remote, as if impatiently she looked from afar off at her mother’s world and, recognizing her mental distance from it, resented her enforced physical presence in it. She had been dry, sealed; she had wanted to get away, and she had done so at the earliest possible moment.

Mrs. Jesson drew a long, tremulous breath. She closed her eyes.

Instantly she opened them again and found the scene unchanged. But as she began to reproach herself Marie turned and saw her.

At once Marie became silent; her mouth closed, her eyes grew impenetrable. Then deliberately, with a prudence which quite chilled the mother, she smiled. Without ceasing to smile at Mrs. Jesson she put down her cup and made a slight silencing motion of her hand towards Dido. Her lips moved rapidly, but Mrs. Jesson could only just hear her voice.

Then she called out: “Good morning. *Why* did you think it necessary to get up? You were told to stop in bed till ten. You can’t have any of this tea. Miss Baird, is your

life made a burden to you by an obstinate parent who determinedly upsets all your calculations, no matter how much she's bullied? . . . You may come along and sit down, mother. I'll accept you with resignation, but if you want tea you must order fresh. There's only half a cup left, and I'm going to have that."

She burst into resonant laughter. Dido had quietly removed the book from the table and was holding it. She now stood up.

Mrs. Jesson, looking at the book, came out on the verandah. "Marie told her to move the book," she thought. Aloud she said, unable to resist smiling as she received Marie's casual but good-tempered glance: "I don't want any tea, Marie. I'm sorry if I've upset your arrangements, but I woke up. . . . Good morning, Miss Baird. You've had a walk early."

She observed with pleasure Dido's clear and modest look, her "Yes, just up Broad Down," and then the lowering of her gaze to Mrs. Jesson's neck, her motionless attitude, her round, firm face, and the straight hair combed austere behind her ears.

Already Mrs. Jesson was moving out of gloom. Gazing at Dido she ceased to feel jealous. Dido, though she held the book, and thus silently encouraged Marie in deception, in cruel and lacerating reserves, seemed without mistrust, without triumph. She did not exploit her privileges, she did not look at Mrs. Jesson as at an intruder, perhaps an enemy. "Every one does what Marie tells them," Mrs. Jesson thought. "You can't refuse her anything."

Now that book was the symbol of Dido's subjugation.

In Dido's stillness, and happy waiting, she discerned respect for herself, liking, sympathy. And these in any one young! She wanted to speak to Dido, to convey her pleasure in the friendship with Marie, but she was so long searching for words, she stood smilingly staring with such an aspect of intending no remark, that Dido looked up, smiled, and with a short little bow went off round the house.

"Well?" Marie said at once, "what are you going to do? Have some tea?"

"Yes, I think so. I'll tell Nellie. Is there anything you want, dear?"

"No, there isn't. O-h-h." Marie yawned and stretched.

After a timid glance at her, Mrs. Jesson went in.

Marie finished her tea, and yawned and groaned and ate biscuits until her mother returned.

"I had a perfectly hectic night," she said, then. "First Bessie came prowling round to know if I wanted another wrap. I told her to go to the devil—and she did"—Marie shouted with laughter—"looking cut to the quick; as if any one could be civil at two in the morning! And I slept for an hour and then three horses paddled in. I simply *plunged* out of bed and had to chase them over the lawn with no slippers. Fortunately it was brilliant moonlight. *Who* is it leaves the gate open?—Here's your tea. And letters! Ah! . . . May's scrawl, and . . ."

She stopped so suddenly that Mrs. Jesson, who was watching Nellie Wilson set a second table for her, turned round. Miss Wilson turned too. She looked at Marie with dim, serious eyes. Then quietly she went away.

Mrs. Jesson, waiting for the tea to draw, her legs rather

widely open, her outspread hands resting on her knees, a length of striped petticoat disclosed, watched Marie peacefully.

The letter in May's handwriting lay on the bed. Marie was reading the second one. To Mrs. Jesson her face looked inscrutable. Mrs. Jesson poured out some tea, sipped it, ate a biscuit, and noted, all the time, in tranquil ignorance as to their meaning, the small smiles which came on Marie's mouth, her moments of almost dark resolution, the continual glitter of her eyes, so young and fresh between the dull, thick eyelids. She wondered whom the letter was from.

Marie finished it. She read May's, placed both on the table, and looked out absently across the garden.

For a few moments she remained silent, musing. Then she turned her little, conscious, sparkling eyes on her mother.

Mrs. Jesson, crumbs on her mouth and blouse, her jaws moving with a placid and ruminative air, smiled at her. She did not venture to speak.

"Well, you've got to be shocked and you've got to weep at some time," Marie said, "so you may as well be both now. Do try to be as intelligent as possible, and as little Mid-Victorian. I wouldn't inflict the shock on you, only if I don't you'll say something embarrassing in your ignorance and give us all a strained moment. You've a perfect genius for doing that."

She laughed good-naturedly, looking kindly at her mother, even softly.

Mrs. Jesson put down the cup she had just raised. Her hand shook violently; her eyes had an arrested look. Without a change of position or color she expressed the stillness

of fear, the instinctive prudent stillness of an animal in the presence of an obscure danger. Marie had something to tell her. "Shocked," "weep"—those words banged in her head like thunder-claps.

"All right, all right," Marie cried, contemptuously pitying. "*Why* will you get in a panic at once? I'm here, and *well*, and looking forward to great times. There's nothing to weep for, only you will weep because it's the conventional Mid-Victorian thing to do. It's not my action which will shock you."

She was sitting up in bed now, dancingly twining her fingers together, a sensuous smile drawing her upper lip under her nose.

A little reassured, Mrs. Jesson wanly smiled. "You frighten me so, Marie. Tell me what you mean. I'll try and take it in—in your modern way. If it's not bad news . . ."

"Good Lord, no. It's May. *Have* you suspected that she's entertained a warmer feeling for Louis Gosden than mere friendship or did your innocence dream of platonic relations only? . . . Now don't say you've forgotten who Louis is—you met him and his wife a dozen times when May and I were at Kensington. Well—him. May's succumbed. That's all. I thought it would be sooner. Drink your tea up and declaim your morality and have done with it. May's coming down to-night, so you've till five to get a real sane, unmoral view of the matter."

Mrs. Jesson, with an automatic obedience, looked at her tea-cup, but she could not lift her hand. There was no movement, no definite image, in her mind. A darkness had

descended upon her; it rolled voluminously over her heart. Only in the movements of her hands and lips, in the blind, narrow gaze of her eyes at the polished and clean-cut holly leaves of the hedge, did she betray her intense struggle against that darkness, her endeavor to reduce it to a sharp, nameable emotion.

Greatly timid and shrinking, she turned to Marie. Marie was still smiling, a subtle sensuous smile. Enlightenment came to Mrs. Jesson.

“Marie, I don’t like to hear you talk like that,” she said, pulling at her skirt with trembling hands. “It—hurts me.”

She could not go on. Vast, vague shapes swept before her mental vision, and, sitting with a motionless body, with steadily plucking hands, with mumbling movements of lip, she panted after them, she traversed, breathless and swift, great tracts of darkness until words began to form in her head and she thought—it was so dreadful to hear Marie talking like this, scorning the old standards of right and wrong, condoning sin, implying that it was not sin. She didn’t care about May—how wicked she was! She did care. Stop to analyze this, when fears for Marie crowded in her heart! Impossible. She swept May aside. She stared at the terror of Marie’s ultimate actions, at the nightmare of Marie’s emancipation.

Then she became aware that Marie was speaking. She lifted one hand and rubbed her damp lips. Naïvely with the other she pulled her blouse away from her round bosom. She was so hot; she felt that her face streamed with perspiration.

“Wait, darling,” she said. “I feel confused. It seems to

me a dreadful thing. I can't look at things like you. I can't think that your way is right. We are told in the Bible . . ."

"Oh, *mother*, don't *preach*." Marie sat forward with a bump which made the bed creak. "For heaven's sake spare me what Paul said or thought. I look at things in a perfectly natural, unmoral way. Louis' wife is a beast; May is the one woman for him—there's a perfect sympathy between them; they'll stick to each other all their lives, probably; they don't marry merely because he has a wife living. If she wants a divorce they will marry. Do remember people are made of flesh and blood. I've seen May perfectly *rock* when he's been near her—the call of the senses. She can't help it—it's perfectly natural."

Mrs. Jesson did not speak. All her face was crimson; even her eyes looked reddened; there was something strained and unnatural in their fixity as if they were under a spell.

Compressing her lips, Marie gave her mother an irritated, dark stare. Then, after a brief pause, she began to smile; she suddenly laughed.

"Well, that's the news which was to shock you. Now will you weep? You will really be very comforted. I'm going to convince you of my orthodoxy."

Mrs. Jesson's eyes moved round to her, her mouth twitched; she gazed at her with a simple and profound perplexity.

Marie banged the letters on the table with a violence which rattled the china. "This second communication," she said, "is from a friend of mine—Mr. Ramsay. I've met him during the last year. He's an awfully nice boy.

And he writes to say he's taken lodgings here for three weeks—his holidays have started—and he'll be round to-morrow—to see me. Does this meet with your approval, my puritan mother? His intentions are quite honorable."

She burst into prolonged joyous laughter.

Mrs. Jesson again endured the sensation of impact. The appalling creations of her fancy were shattered. She felt at first conscious of nothing but Marie's supreme elusiveness. She felt as if she were pursuing Marie, and then, when that perverse complex disquieting being seemed under her gaze, the vision was demolished, was shown to be an illusion, and another flashed upon her.

"Mr. Ramsay?" she echoed. "I don't know him, do I?"

"Haven't I just said I've met him during the last year! Unless your astral body's been projecting itself into my flat you do *not* know him. I hope, for your sake, it hasn't. It would have had some shocks! . . . Oh, mother, you are lovely! Your faith in me is truly touching. I believe you suspect me of the most scarlet immoralities. Finish—that—tea—and be sane. I'm *trying* to penetrate you with the fact of my imminent engagement to Hobart Ramsay—we call him Hob. He'll probably propose during these three weeks, and unless I change my mind—I may find I prefer Tommy Lucas!—I shall accept him."

Slowly, with an almost childish labor, Mrs. Jesson built up out of these statements a full and beautiful certitude. Some one loved Marie—Marie loved him—they would marry.

Now she became governed by an immense excitement. The thoughts which rushed into her mind were not *new*,

they were not vague; they were the deeply pondered thoughts of her solitudes. In the midst of her agitation she had a sense of the familiarity of this moment. She had constructed it so often, speaking in dispute, in approval, in gladness, with an invisible Marie, that she was dumb only while she assured herself of its reality.

Then she spoke in a deep and solemn voice.

“You make me very happy, Marie. I would rather see you married. . . . But tell me about him. Is he good? I would give you—gladly—though I should suffer—to a good man. . . .”

She began to move her feet, her lips, and, convulsively, her hands. She did not look at Marie. She looked before her, silently struggling. It was a tremendous struggle between her violent emotions and the exigencies of her temperament which compelled these emotions to be hidden and for ever unexpressed.

From the heart of her battle with tears, with outcries, she heard Marie speaking.

“Oh, he’s awfully nice,” Marie said. “Quite good too! I’m sure you’ll take him to your heart. He’s younger than me—he’s about twenty-eight—but I don’t think I mind that. He’s quite charming. Of course he worships me. Oh yes——” She paused, dreamily looking downward over her suddenly quiet fingers. “I think I shall have him. I like him . . . ‘but he loves me,’ as Browning says. Pots of money. He’s with his father, who’s a solicitor, but his mother has the money—a frightfully bourgeois person, but *rolling* in money from a defunct uncle or somebody, and mercifully generous—which makes one pardon her Walden’s

Jacobean Suites, etc.—and Hob has a tremendous allowance. He's university and the father is cultured, so it's all quite good . . . quite good."

"And you love him, Marie?"

"Oh!" With a gay shriek Marie leapt off the bed. "Romantic woman! Love! What are those *lovely* lines of Austin Dobson's?" Broadly smiling, poised on the red-tiled floor with a bird's look of being quite tense with the power, the intention, of flight, she declaimed:

"'Loved if you will, she never named it so,
Love comes unseen—we only see it go.'

Lovely!"

She laughed loudly, contemplative in her absorbed appreciation. Then she caught up the letters, plunged her head downward to her wristlet watch, and howled musically again. "Ten o'clock! Oh! I must fly. I've a thousand things to do. Don't let any one come near the bathroom for the next three-quarters of an hour. I'm going to wash my head. May will sleep out here with me, so *don't* get making a bed for her. Don't do anything till I see you again. Heavens, there's a boy at that cottage window! I forgot they could see across. Lord! how corrupted he'll be!"

Erect, smoothly swift, uncontrollably laughing, holding her white nightdress up to her bosom, she stepped into the drawing-room. She vanished from Mrs. Jesson's gaze.

IV

For some time Mrs. Jesson did not move. She passed through moments of vacuity, of dark incertitude, of happi-

ness, of apprehension, of profound sadness. Whole ages seemed to sweep over her head. When, at last, with a deep sigh, she looked observantly round her this illusion of the lapse of vast spaces of time was not destroyed. She gazed back, with a sense of loss, at irrecoverable periods of life; she felt as if, since she came on to this verandah, she had died and was now reborn to new conditions of existence. Most strange and lonely she felt.

She watched a cart go up the main road, along another road the movement of a human figure, dark, small, pointed, oddly stiff and meager under the uprising of the hills. The August sun stared from a sky full of light, remote, and pure. A network of sound was flung across the quietude—voices, footsteps, the opening and shutting of gates. She became impressed with the notion of life, of action. It impelled her to rise. And directly she was standing, the fact of her own existence became beautiful and inspiring; she had a moment of perfect happiness. Her pain, her dread, her joy, her hope—they were all precious to her.

Soundlessly she shaped the words: "I am a mother. Therefore I suffer. But it is better to be a mother—than anything—in the world. Marie will marry. Thank God. I wish—I had—Henry with me now. How glad he would be. Perhaps he sees."

Exalted, rapt beyond consciousness of her surroundings, she gazed at the white, burning sky, not clearly visualizing her husband, but, with a heightened perceptiveness, capturing the faint murmurs, the delicate contacts of possible presences. Was he perhaps near her, informed, approving?

She dropped suddenly back into prosaic activity, without

any sense of jolt or strangeness. She smiled naturally, even with humor.

“I mustn’t stand dreaming here. I shall have Nellie hunting me up to ask about lunch.”

She picked up Marie’s tray and, thinking that it was the day for turning out the dining-room, went quickly into the house.

She was very busy all the morning. She gave Nellie the orders for lunch, she rebuked a little sternly the daily housemaid who had cracked a teapot stand, she remonstrated with Bessie Hammond on her needless labors in dusting the dining-room; she watered the young cabbages, picked French beans and apples, pulled up some young onions, and trussed a duck. For two hours she was moving about, her hands occupied with various matters, her eyes bent on different shapes and colors. And everything she touched, everything she scrutinized, came afterwards in the encounters of the following days to be evocative of a darkness, a radiance, the mental atmosphere wherein she had stood when she dealt with the thing on that morning. For days afterwards she could not enter the china cupboard without all the soft colors, the round, white stare of many plates, coming at her through the dun shade with the rightness, the warming charm, she had seen in them when she had looked in with her mind whispering, “Marie says he’s good. I can’t believe she’s going to be married.”

For a flashing instant, before she noticed the teapot stand forlornly set on an empty tray with a white line across its blue and green tiles, she had been impressed with the delightfulness of those rows of plates, those funnels of cups,

those squat or slender jugs. Distant, immeasurably distant, was the thought that Marie would have a home, and china.

In the same manner the scullery table, the old discolored basket which she had used for the beans and the onions, the pale-green mounds of the apples on the larder shelf, were all intimately associated with her feelings on that morning; she looked at them tenderly as being touched with the beauty of her emotions; they were almost sacred to her, invested with a peculiar dignity.

At the time she was scarcely conscious of any of these things. When at the end of the morning she found the duties were done she had a faint wonder—when had she done them? She had never before been so aware of our dual existence. Competently, with but little faltering, she attended to household matters and all the while she covered long, intricate tracks of thought, she entered heavy nights of fear, and came out into spaces of light and tranquillity, she strove, she dreamed, she hated, she loved.

Was this man good enough for Marie? Did Marie love him? How dreadful it would be to lose Marie! And yet, had she not always wanted Marie to marry? Yes, she was glad, she was quite sure she was glad.

But Marie would go away; her mother now would be less than ever to her; she would love her husband and her children. Marie was lost now, irrevocably lost.

Wicked, selfish old woman to think like this! Marie's happiness. That was all that mattered. If Marie was happy, why, she too would be happy. She was happy, now: yes, she was. Quite happy.

Hobart Ramsay. Twenty-eight. That is, four years

younger than Marie. Was he old enough? Could he at that age understand and appreciate Marie?

Marie was very self-willed. Could he possibly know how to deal with her? If, after Marie was married, he failed to understand her, hurt her, blundered—oh, she would want to drag Marie away; no man should make Marie miserable. Quarrels—dissension—divergence. All possible, all threatened.

But if Marie did not marry! Marriage held perils enough, but unmarried Marie was still more terrifying. These terrible modern ideas! Modern ethics—they appalled her. May Bessant, that nice girl. And according to Marie it was not sin, May was not to be looked on with pity, with compassion, with, if one was very stern, condemnation and rejection. All she did was “natural.” But were there then no laws recognized, no laws of restraint? Surely to yield was to be fleshly; it was debasing the name of love. No, Marie said, and others too, that true morality had nothing to do with forms and ceremonies; that the relations between May and this man were a great deal more truly moral than the relations between this man and his wife. Or something like that. No doubt she had got it wrong. She didn’t understand. She clung to the simple—or did it only seem simple?—beautiful creed of marriage and faithfulness and a love spiritualized—the kind of love and life she had had with Henry. She might be wrong—the world would, one would imagine, progress, ascend—but she could not look on May other than as a fallen woman. She could hardly bear to think of her with Marie; in this union with Louis Gosden she could see only laxity, animalism.

In the past, such matters were not mentioned in the hearing of unmarried girls—well, thirty-two was young—and yet here was Marie calmly discussing it.

Marriage—marriage. She would not be happy, she would not feel safe till she saw Marie married.

“I would rather see her lying dead at my feet than as May is now.”

Marie must marry. She emerged from her raiding emotions with this certitude immovably and grimly formed.

CHAPTER V
HOBART RAMSAY

I

ALL through the next day she was made physically tired by the feeling of suspense. She thought that any moment Hobart Ramsay might come; and when they had had dinner and were in the garden again and he still was not arrived, a little unease oppressed her. Did Marie, perhaps, imagine him to be more intensely admiring than he actually was?

Marie had dressed her in the afternoon. Nearly an hour Marie had spent on her, brushing and arranging her hair. "There *is* a way of doing it which makes you look a *grande dame*," Marie said, "and I can do it," fastening and settling the gray silk dress and the little gray-and-pink brocade coat, powdering her face, scenting, providing with handkerchief.

Hot, smilingly frank and simple, in her magnificence she sat in the garden with a book. She did not dare to loll! She sat woodenly, keeping her coiffure away from the chair-back. Sometimes she forgot and settled herself easily. Then Marie shrieked:

"*Mother!* Will you get up and sit so that the hem of your skirt isn't bunched up under you, and so the coat is flat? Cross your ankles. If you don't your petticoat shows at the back."

She obeyed, smiling gently. Her discomfort was extreme, but she forgot it in her long reveries when she sat bolt upright, her arms, bare from the elbow, stretched across her knees and looking warm and rosy under the startling whiteness of her powdered face; her thoughts insensibly acquiring the slowness, the calm, of the still day, of the garden which lay hazy and motionless in the thick air, the bright flower-heads standing without a quiver, the trees mute and seeming permanent in beauty, beyond the mutations of time or season.

She did not know whether she was happy or sad. She had sunk into a fatalistic peace.

But after dinner, when it was a little cooler, she felt the need of movement. Momentarily forgetful of Marie's orders, she pinned up her dress and went down the lawn with a watering-can, naïvely displaying much of her black stockings and her petticoat.

At the other end of the garden Marie and May were sitting together, smoking and talking. Several times she looked over at them with trouble, with dread.

Miss Bessant betrayed no signs of having passed recently through a severe spiritual conflict. She was large and beautiful; there was a fine immobility about her body; it was grandly modeled, having a silencing effect on the mind by the mere fact of its size and calm. Her eyes looked out from her broad, pale face tranquilly; her features were rather heavy with the marked lines of the Roman style. Her fair hair stood above her head firm and solid like a helmet.

"I must be very ignorant, or very stupid," Mrs. Jesson,

for the twentieth time that day, reflected. "At my age I can't understand a young woman of thirty. I like May. I can't believe—what Marie tells me. May looks at me as truthfully as she always did. She looks a good girl. It's all—beyond my understanding. We old people don't belong to the world now. I'm afraid to judge it. I'm too ignorant."

She heard a gay shout from Marie. Turning, she saw a young man, very tall, very youthful, very easy, coming up the lawn.

II

Marie, delicately buoyant, went to meet him. "*Here* you are. *Good* evening. Come and be introduced. Isn't mother lovely! For one hour I adorned her, and now she meets you mostly in a petticoat and with *wet* hands and an earthy smear on her nose. Oh, mother, you always disgrace me. Mr. Hobart Ramsay—intimately, Hob or Hobbie—my mother."

She slipped behind Mrs. Jesson, clasped her by the arms and thrust her at Hobart, who was laughingly, dramatically, bowing.

"How do you do?" he said. "May I be allowed to water for you? I can."

Mrs. Jesson laughed, convulsively she pressed his hand, she gazed at him, her mouth open a little, her eyes moist and passionate.

She was tall, but he was able to look down at her slightly. He was slender, with a high head and a long, pale face. He moved lightly and with alertness, with an indescribable

air of energy and zest. His large, wide-open, pale-blue eyes had a rather wan look; under fair brows and between lids a little reddened and almost bare of eyelash, they gazed at her with a kind of strained, fixed candor. She decided that he looked happy but tired. He was large featured and there was character in his expression, but she was most keenly conscious of his palely bright and humorous youth. She felt herself to be in the presence of a most delightful expansiveness; he virtually offered himself to her for alliance, mental exchanges, and sympathies. And he was modest, too, and unconscious.

She liked him.

She spoke in incoherent greeting, laughing, and not ceasing openly to gaze at him. When Marie led him off to the imperturbable Miss Bessant, still smoking in splendid and ponderous repose, Mrs. Jesson did not for a moment move. Then, with an effort, she followed Marie and Hob—Hob! What a funny name!—thinking easily.

“I certainly do like him. He has a good face, an honest face. He looks modest. I mustn’t judge hastily, but his appearance is very favorable. He only looks a boy. I had pictured some one older for her. But it don’t matter—it isn’t one of the essential things.”

The conversation came to her, obscurely allusive and broken.

“What time did you get home that night?” Marie was asking him.

“With the milk,” Miss Bessant drawled.

Hob spun round to her, comically protesting. “With the cream,” he said.

They were silent for an instant, smilingly at ease.

Then Miss Bessant brought out, unruffled but firm, "Oh, damn these wasps!"

Marie, with her most marked air of joy in every detail of life, turned delightedly to Hob. "Did you know that the queen wasp lays forty thousand eggs a year? I believe that's the figure."

Hob fixed his young equally delighted eyes on her. "Makes quite a habit of it," he commented.

They all laughed.

Mrs. Jesson stopped. Hob was not aware of her approach, and she again inspected him.

Her mind kept repeating: "This is the man Marie will marry. He's come down to propose to her."

She gazed at him stonily, unable to believe in his reality. He moved and spoke and was expressive, but nothing could penetrate her. Her eyes wandered from him to May and Marie and back to him, and she felt only a great helplessness and blankness. She dimly told herself that she had to be very watchful, very keen, very wise.

Marie looked at her. May happened to be speaking, and Marie, unobserved by Hob, softly smiled at her mother, pressing her with the significance of his presence here.

That placid smile beamed through Mrs. Jesson's mental fog and dispelled it. With her answering smile she gave to Marie pledges of support, of protection, of leadership. She gazed at Hob with an almost fierce concentration on his fitness for one office—the office of providing Marie with continual happiness.

Marie said he loved her, and Marie loved him.

She looked for signs of love.

She could not with certitude say he displayed any. He was very easy and charming. With his mobile brows he expressed tolerance, rebuke, sympathy; he shuffled his feet in absurd jocosity; he looked at both women with a kind of humorous pleasure; and once or twice when Marie was speaking to Miss Bessant, he darted a serious glance at Marie. His face then appeared firm and intent; she could not say that his expression was passionate; he had rather, in his pallor, in the narrow masculine lines of his head, an aspect slightly frigid. She was baffled.

But Marie disclosed a fine assurance. She talked a great deal; she turned her head and neck in pretty smooth gestures of assent or denial, she rested her eyes on him in the naturalness and clarity of perfect confidence.

“Even their love-making’s different,” Mrs. Jesson thought. “He looks at her a good deal. I think I’d rather he was serious and seemed to—to observe her. His love is more likely to be lasting. He only looks a boy; I had pictured some one much older.”

Hob had assented to a game of tennis. He and Marie now came up the lawn together. For the first time he became aware of Mrs. Jesson’s nearness.

“But I promised I’d water the cabbages!” he exclaimed.

Mrs. Jesson almost maternally regarded him. “No, you play tennis. I haven’t much more to do.”

He seemed to stand prepared to serve her, a little stooping, and peculiarly light in attitude and expression.

Her heart throbbed. Oh, she did indeed like him. Her face began to work. Incomplete thoughts, too swift to be

transfixed, whirled in her head. She was sensible of the supreme joy and agony of her condition. One hand groped out towards him.

His very faint surprise was caught by her and at once she became dignified, simply his hostess.

She talked to him about tennis while Marie went indoors to change her shoes and bring rackets and balls. She thought that while he modestly allowed her to direct the conversation he was also a little wary, a little withdrawn. Had she betrayed her ardent interest in him? she wondered. She had, troublously, the sense that he had leapt back beyond reach, beyond scrutiny. Was he then not ready or not willing to be assessed as Marie's lover?

Her uncertainties roughened her voice and made her glance hard and proud. Her accidentally angry brows deepened the grimness of her look. A silence fell between them.

Then Marie returned, and Hob smiled at Mrs. Jesson. He clicked his heels together and stiffly exhibited himself: "May I remind you, Mrs. Jesson, that I haven't played for months and that I am going to do great things? Astonishing things."

She laughed a little and he went off to help Marie tighten the net.

They were distracted from this by an accusing prolonged "Ah-h!" followed by a plaintive "Charming scene! Bucolic! No, no, idyllic! Figures for a Greek fresco. Don't move, I beseech you."

They all turned. Jimmy Ainger and Tommy Lucas were advancing up the lawn. Mrs. Jesson frowned.

"It's that maniac Jimmy Ainger," Marie called to May; "I've told you about him."

"You have. Keep him away from me. I don't like the looks of him," Miss Bessant replied.

Mr. Ainger stopped. "Cruel!" he moaned. He threw up his hands, bent his knees slightly, and gazed skyward.

"Oh, don't be such a fool, Jimmy!" Marie shrieked. "Come and be introduced to Mr. Ramsay. Make him behave, Tommy."

"I can't, really I can't," Mr. Lucas rapidly protested. "I'm such a peaceable Johnny, I can't use coercion."

Mrs. Jesson watched them shaking hands, talking, gesticulating. Most earnestly she regretted this visit. "I should have liked Mr. Ramsay to have had a quiet time alone with Marie. . . . I wish she wouldn't call them by their Christian names. She hasn't seen them for two years. . . . Mr. Ainger has only come to see her. I don't like him. But if she loves Mr. Ramsay it won't matter."

Jimmy Ainger was about forty. He had upstanding gray hair; his very wide head was flattened at the back and looked, in profile, curiously triangular; his eyebrows were arched and amazed above widely set black eyes; there was good-nature in his fleshy chin and jaw, and resolution in his firmly closed lips. He took very short steps, moving his legs stiffly, a concentrated but placid expression on his face.

Mr. Lucas might have been a few years older. His most noticeable characteristics were the squared elbows and bowed legs of the horseman. He wore a little gray Homburg on one side of a small, fair head. His eyes were greedy and incessantly searched the faces and figures of the women.

Mrs. Jesson, glaring and stationary, surveyed him as if he were an unclean insect.

They talked for a little longer and then Marie gave them rackets. They had come in tennis shoes, prepared for a game. They took their places, Marie and Hob together. Mrs. Jesson sat down beside Miss Bessant. Jealously she surveyed them.

III

A little later Dido and Hilda returned from a walk. As they came through the gate Hob cried, "Game!—and set!"

Jimmy portentously laid his racket on the grass. He stuck out his chin at the heated Mr. Lucas. "Ye've praäperly spoilt my evening, my man!" he stated. "Doünt provoke me. I am calm. I'm quite calm—but . . ."

"I apologize. I told you I couldn't play." Tommy uttered rapid extenuations.

"There's Miss Baird," Marie said. "Perhaps she'll take Tommy's place. Miss Baird!"

Dido came up. Hilda, all in white, her eyes dark and long in the white oval of her face, remained near the edge of the lawn, sharing with Dido the scrutiny of the men.

"Do you play tennis, Miss Baird? Oh, good! Will you take Mr. Lucas's place? You see him thoroughly and deservedly crushed. You know Mr. Ainger. Judge him gently. He is not ever thus. Mr. Ramsay—Miss Baird. You don't mind playing? It's awfully good of you. You have shoes?—and a racket. Oh, admirable person. Does

your cousin play? . . . Well, will she mind joining us later? We've simply no use for her at present." Marie laughed. "But make her bring a chair. She can criticize Jimmy and administer consolation to Tommy. There's Christian charity for you, Tommy."

"Oh, you know, I'm overwhelmed, I really am," Tommy exclaimed, thrusting forward his little head to gaze at Hilda.

Hilda, to whom only parts of this speech had been audible, but who understood from their glances that she was being proffered to Tommy, laughed uncertainly, turning her innocent, inquiring eyes from one to the other and reddening dimly. Tommy always confused her. Dido, even now in the midst of swift impressions, wondered whether Hilda really had heard of or suspected the kind of reputation Tommy bore.

It was a lightning speculation amid vivid if imperfect thoughts. As she answered Marie, smiled, shook hands with Hob, and acknowledged May Bessant's friendly motion of a cigarette, she knew that she admired Marie's dress, that she admired Miss Bessant, and that an involuntary ripple of happiness flowed through her as she spoke to Mr. Ramsay. She had an instant of suspended thought, of forgetfulness of the others, as she smiled at him. There was nothing sexual in her pleasure. His humanity, his newness, perhaps a little his appearance; the unforeseeable surprises of life, so infinitely seductive—these were the things which produced her expression of delight, of cordiality.

She was wearing a fawn wool coat, and a tweed skirt. Her face was flushed and soft under her wide hat brim,

very round and girlish in its immobility above her long throat. She seemed wonderfully fresh; there was something arresting in her joyous and candid smile, in her tall body.

“Are you a good player?” she asked Hob.

“Not at all,” he replied, gazing at her with a slowly fading smile.

“Is that modesty or the uncompromising truth?” she said, showing her teeth and lowering her eyes.

“The truth. I haven’t been able to get much practice. I’m in very poor form.”

Dido looked at him. His smile had quite vanished. He looked back with the empty, pale stare of a statue.

“What a funny young man!” she thought. She turned to Marie. “I’ll get my racket and change my shoes.”

Jimmy extended his arms as she passed him. “Hist! We are observed, but—help me roll him up. Puppy! I say it again, he’s a puppy!”

Laughing, Dido looked back at Hob. His eyes were on Marie. As she gazed he darted a sharp, critical glance at herself. She left him menaced by Jimmy, laughing.

“A very abrupt young man,” she thought. “I wonder if he thinks Marie pretty.”

And there was Hilda, smiling, interested. The progress down the garden into Hilda’s presence became, oddly, like the passage from one realm into another. She entered Hilda’s presence with a feeling of home-coming; Hilda seemed possessed of a wonderful stability. Dido did not analyze this feeling, but obscurely she knew that it was the thought that she had an orbit of her own and an un-critical sharer and guardian of it that made these flights

into other orbits and other systems so smooth and lovely. If one were alone, how the sense of adventure then would be mixed with the knowledge of risks and uncertainties! But there Hilda very palpably stood, like a quiet, immovable shore after the thrilling caprices of the open sea.

Dido smiled at her. "I'm going for my shoes," she explained. "You're to take a chair where Miss Bessant is and console Tommy."

"Oh dear!" Hilda laughed. "I think I'd rather not. I never know what to say to Tommy." She continued laughing.

"I'm afraid you can't get out of it," Dido said. "And you needn't say anything. He merely wants you to admire him. I suppose you can pretend you do? It will be pretense, I suppose?"

Hilda was laughing very much now. "Yes, it will be pretense," she said decisively. "I don't like him at all. But if you say I must go?"

"I do. You look awfully nice. Tell me what you think of the newcomer, Mr. Ramsay. He merely glares at me. I'm sure in that hat you ought to thaw him."

Hilda, quite red with pleasure, courageously picked up a chair. Dido went in, smiling, almost running.

When again she came up the lawn, swinging a racket, hatless, she found them all gathered round Hilda. Hilda was sitting by Mrs. Jesson. She was laughing, but not with understanding; she uncomprehendingly gazed at them, a defenseless look, a stupidity, which was right and lovable, about her white brow, her closely pressed knees and hands, her narrow shoulders.

Dido's happiness was shaken. They were teasing Hilda. She immediately became antagonistic to them. She descried in their dissimilar bodies something dark and ugly. A few moments before there had been harmony and fairness about them as they stood in the rich evening, concerned with her, inviting her into their amusement, but now it was as if something had been peeled away from her eyes, some generous idealistic veil, and there reality was bared—they were gross, disproportionate, mean, unpleasant.

She quickened her pace, her mouth set, her eyes stern. She would not have Hilda laughed at. Simply because Hilda was slow and simple, did not swear nor make "fruitily" allusive remarks, displayed embarrassment and unsophistication; Hilda, star-like . . .

She swept into the group, unaware that Hob was watching her, aware only of Hilda's appealing and hopeful glance.

"Miss Baird," Marie cried, "these wretched men are shamefully teasing your cousin. Do come and support her. They are perfectly idiotic."

Dido looked at her. Was Marie ally or was she insincere?

Marie's eyes were interested and kind. "She's subtle," Dido thought, and turned militantly to the principal aggressors, Jimmy and Tommy.

Jimmy besought her with his hands. "Now don't be biased, Miss Baird," he said in a perfectly reasonable voice. "Come with an open mind. I say—and I have a reputation for veracity—I merely say that I saw Miss Nicholls taking a stroll on the Green this morning in her kimono and with no shoes or stockings. That's all. I said she looked charm-

ing. I saw it from my bedroom window. And Miss Nicholls denies it—flatly and—note this—with an incriminating agitation.”

“I wasn’t even up at the time,” Hilda’s high, earnest voice assured them.

They all laughed. Dido felt the supreme detachment of herself and Hilda. She could not help laughing a little, though she looked tenderly at Hilda.

“The best thing to do,” she thought, “is to answer Jimmy in the same strain, but I don’t think I can be daring easily enough. It would be so awful to stumble.” Aloud she said crisply, “Hallucination.”

“All men are liars,” Miss Bessant commented, with heavy resignation.

“Solomon said that,” Marie cried, “and he was a wise man.”

“Support us, Mr. Ramsay,” Jimmy said. “Crush them with a word.”

“I dare you to,” Marie challenged him.

Hob looked quickly at them all. His glance imperceptibly lingered on Hilda and Dido. Then he spoke with his eyes on Jimmy.

“I’m out of this. I offer my remark merely in the interest of accuracy. Don’t accuse me of partisanship. ‘I said *in my haste* that all men are liars.’ ”

“Thank you!” Jimmy clasped his hands with a sigh of relieved tension.

“It’s the only time they speak the truth when they speak in haste,” Miss Bessant placidly shouted.

Tommy and Jimmy howled her down. They turned on her, leaving the others silent, and inattentive to them.

Marie was thoughtfully looking at Dido, who looked back, her intuitions sharply plying about Marie. "She isn't hostile," Dido thought, "but she wonders over us as if we were phenomenal creatures."

Dido became a little irritated. It was not pleasant to think that Hilda and herself were, because of their slower wit, their freshness, their inexperience, objects of wonder and tolerant pity to Marie. She felt suddenly hot. Mistrustfully she glanced at Hob.

She met his inexpressive gaze. He at once looked away, not apparently discomposed but impenetrable, spiritually as well as actually, silent. She felt most keenly that he was not communicating with her. He seemed deliberately to be reserving himself. She continued to watch him, coolly approving his appearance, and with her curiosity stimulated by his manner. It was almost rude of him so firmly to abstain from addressing her.

Then she became aware of Marie's scrutiny. She looked back at Marie, scarcely able to conceal her annoyance at her own simplicity. So openly to exhibit interest in Hob! What would Marie think?

Marie was standing perfectly still. She suggested an almost tense concentration on Dido's emotions. She scrutinized Dido without a shade of softness. She looked a mature woman, ruthless, penetrating, and suddenly armored in dignity.

"I'm quite as clever as she is," Dido thought, "and

Hilda is immeasurably above her in goodness, but we shall both be extinguished by her merely because she not only sees through us, but because she is experienced enough and *hard* enough and confident enough to know how to take advantage of her knowledge. I can see through her, but I can't—I don't dare—attack her. I can only guard myself. Hilda can't even do that. And I can only by not betraying what I think and feel. I must be uninteresting if I'm to escape—analysis."

So this was what intercourse with Marie amounted to! Perfect passivity, a continual reticence—these were imposed on her if she were not to quarrel with Marie or ignominiously be assessed and classified by her. Dido was sobered. Gravely she looked down. Contact! The beautiful, diffident advances into another's mind, the firm marriage of the one mind to the other, even the equal skirmishes, the brisk rivalries, the merely superficial association! They were all delusions. The realities were misinterpretations, a good-natured contempt.

She lifted her eyes. Hob was watching Hilda. Before her brain had fully realized this Jimmy turned round.

"Well, are you ready?" he asked. "I suggest you have Miss Baird for your partner, Mr. Ramsay, and Miss Jesson and I will join forces."

He was no longer jesting. He spoke crisply, staring at Marie. Hob looked from Marie to Dido.

"How rude of you, Jimmy!" Marie protested. "We particularly secured Miss Baird for you, so that you and she could be revenged on us."

"Oh, I waive my revenge," Jimmy answered. "I mean

nothing personal, Miss Baird. I merely make a suggestion."

He took one or two uneasy steps, still looking at Marie.

Marie looked straight ahead. "I see no reason why we should change," she said.

Jimmy paused before her. "No reason, no," he assented combatively. "Call it an impulse, if you like. I don't pretend to be reasonable. I merely wish that we should change partners. Unless, of course, Mr. Ramsay absolutely declines to have Miss Baird."

"Don't be ridiculous," Marie exclaimed. She turned to Hob.

"Ridiculous!" Jimmy echoed the word with a strange inflection. Marie glanced at him impassively and then once more looked at Hob. She was quiet now, dignified, and enigmatical.

There was an uncomfortable silence. Dido's enjoyment returned: Tension! She unmistakably divined it, and again the sense of adventure moved her. She forgot that she had resolved to be prudent. Gaily she said:

"You must be a frightfully formidable player, Mr. Ramsay, for Mr. Ainger to shirk facing you like this."

"Disgusting, isn't it?" Hob answered, but he looked at Jimmy, not at her. "Be a man!" he coaxed Jimmy.

Jimmy didn't answer. He seemed to stand over Marie, threatening her, appealing to her.

But why did Hob so persistently avoid acknowledging Dido? Dido watched them all. Emotional silence! Her mind sped, wonderfully swift and eager, seeking the secrets of these motionless, unconsciously dramatic figures. She

darted an expressive glance at Hilda. Good gracious, how dense Hilda looked! She hadn't, bless her, seen anything. Another instant and they would all be plunged into a "scene." She felt it. The air was electric. Some primitive emotion would break bounds and they would no longer be civilized, supple.

It was Hilda who mildly averted that tremendous climax.

"Dido plays awfully well," she said, with an earnest glance. "I'm sure you needn't be afraid she won't be a good partner, Mr. Ainger."

Dido laughed. They all laughed, and their laughter, as hers, was kind, it was sympathetic. Jimmy instantly capitulated. With what inward annoyance? Dido wondered.

"Miss Baird, I accept thee," he said.

"I have to justify that testimonial, haven't I?" Dido answered. She saw that Hob was smiling at Hilda.

The next moment she was walking to the farther court with Jimmy. Hob's smile, his avoidance of herself, Marie's silence and gravity: they arranged themselves in some deep chamber of her mind, important, momentous things. Less definite than they, and evanescent, was a wonder at Mrs. Jesson's submissive quiet; in the group and yet speechless, without influence.

Then her mind became, superficially, at rest. She ran to her place, thinking only of the game. As she turned and faced the net she received across it Hob's measuring glance. She thought, "He's interested in Hilda and me."

The firm evenness of the lawn, the gauzes of light cast over the hills; no sun, no shadow, the only movement the

ineffable noiseless play of swallows above the pond—how happy she felt!

IV

Mrs. Jesson presently said to Hilda, "I always think girls look so graceful playing tennis."

Hilda smiled. "So do I. And Dido plays awfully well."

Mrs. Jesson looked at her, perceiving her as a real personality and not merely as one of those shadows which hovered behind Marie's vital figure. She distinguished in Hilda's placid face sympathy, good sense, deference. These were nice girls. Not modern.

Miss Bessant was asleep; Tommy was watching the tennis. With a sudden feeling of weariness she abandoned her close, anxious search after the emotions implicitly expressed in Jimmy's demeanor, in Hob's, in Marie's. She endured a moment of insight—Marie was hard and selfish; she had for her mother no love, no consideration; Mr. Ramsay appeared neither infatuated nor excited. Let them all go, unsympathetic and indifferent as they were. This good young girl waited contentedly for an exchange of thought. Her brown eyes expressed liking and interest.

Mrs. Jesson stared at Hilda. "I expect you miss your uncle and aunt," she said.

"We do rather." Hilda continued to gaze at her, unsmiling but expressing a perfect receptiveness.

Mrs. Jesson fixed her eyes on some distant point of space. "I shouldn't have come back from America," she said, "but Marie thought she'd like to live here. When my husband

died I thought I should spend the rest of my days in America. I am an American, you know—though I've lived here over thirty years. But I've never felt at home here. All my people are in America. Mr. Jesson and I went over once, but of course, he was a doctor, his work was here. But——”

She had a long pause, her lips moving under her motionless eyes. Equally motionless, Hilda's brown eyes watched her, without impatience, with no lessening of their interest. She seemed without preoccupations.

Mrs. Jesson went on, in the same level tone as if there had been no silence: “I always said that when he died I would go back. I did go. But Marie prefers this place. At least for a time. I don't mind where I am so long as I am with her. I would rather be in America, but not if she keeps coming to England. I miss her so much. She is very full of life, and enthusiasm, and she tires of one place. She's young. I feel I don't care where I am now so long as she stays with me.”

Again she paused.

“Of course. You must miss her dreadfully.” Hilda's tone was not perfunctory, not formal. Mrs. Jesson caught the vibration of a sensible, sincere estimate of the situation. She smiled at Hilda.

There had crept into the fading splendors of the evening a blander and simpler quality. She felt eased. She had somehow gained dignity. The feeling of isolation no longer oppressed her. She had been drawn into the scene and unconsciously she had a sense of an underlying permanent harmony and peace. A gentle hopefulness pervaded her.

She spoke again. "When you love, when you're a mother, you get fanciful. You think of all the dreadful things that might happen. I often think—how small our faith is. We should be so much happier if we could only say meaning`them, those lines—of Browning—'God's in His heaven, all's right with the world.'"

"Yes," said Hilda.

Mrs. Jesson looked at her in the serenity of an enormous pride. How smooth and vague Hilda appeared; virginal, unproved, with no rich memories of pain and bliss. Her luminous face, her slender arms, her narrow body which knew neither wifeness nor motherhood—how incompleated she was, how pitiably ignorant.

"But to be a mother," Mrs. Jesson said, "is to know the greatest happiness—and the greatest suffering. It's the only life for a woman. I hope it will be your life some day."

She sat in her beautiful arrogance, noting Hilda's response to this. Hilda colored lightly. Her brows shook and she made a little startled movement with her eyes. She looked as if she wanted to laugh girlishly, but was restrained by a perception of something touching and impressive in Mrs. Jesson. She was obviously incapable of answering Mrs. Jesson's hope.

Then Mrs. Jesson began to talk of America, of her sisters there, and their children.

Miss Hammond came up the garden. She looked at the tennis players. Very quiet, smiling and confident, she moved towards Mrs. Jesson.

Mrs. Jesson turned to her, "Taking a little walk, Bessie?"

Miss Hammond piped back: "Just a little one. So nice

to see them playing tennis, isn't it? I like to see people enjoying themselves. It makes me feel happy—all the kind friends. They deserve to enjoy themselves."

She paused by Mrs. Jesson. She turned her humid, watchful face to Hilda; her eyes looked out with a peaceful intentness from under her prominent brows.

"I think they're having a good game," Hilda said, with her little air of finding nothing small or trivial. "They're very well matched."

Miss Hammond beamed at her. "So nice for them," she repeated.

"Have you been lying down, Bessie?" Mrs. Jesson said.

"Yes, I have. I'm nicely rested. But I thought I'd take a little walk round, such a lovely evening. Oughtn't we to feel grateful for such lovely weather?"

Hilda surprisedly gazed at her.

Miss Hammond crossed the little space of ground between Hilda's chair and Mrs. Jesson's. She fixed her eyes on Hilda.

"I'm afraid I make you all so anxious," she said. "I'm so sorry."

"No, no, really. Will you have this chair?" Hilda jumped up in palpable concern and bewilderment.

"So kind of you. I'm not going to sit down. I'm just taking a little walk. Do sit down. I think there are a great many kind girls about. I feel so safe and happy."

"Sit down, Miss Nicholls," Mrs. Jesson said. "Miss Hammond really wants to walk."

"Just a little walk," thinly Miss Hammond murmured

and stepped away, pushing her feet along the gravel, her round eyes opal-colored in the delicate green light.

"The light's going," Hob cried.

"Game!" Jimmy gave back.

There was laughter, abuse, the thud of balls. A high, weak voice exclaimed: "Oh, they've finished. What a shame."

Miss Wilson and Miss Hyde were standing near the pergola. Miss Wilson, finding herself examined, flushed, and laughed foolishly.

"You should have come out earlier," Marie said, with a good-natured glance. "Do you play?"

"A little—not very much—I mean; I haven't had many opportunities of practice. But I like to watch it." Miss Wilson very quickly ran a locket up and down its length of ribbon and gazed timidly at Marie.

Marie smiled and then turned away.

"She's nice to that class of people," Dido thought.

It was a spontaneous acknowledgment of virtue in Marie, but her mind was still full of the game, and neither Marie nor Miss Wilson were more than figures to her for the time. She too turned, animatedly addressing Hob:

"You play awfully well. Some of Mr. Ainger's strokes are extraordinary. How *does* he twist himself to hit like this . . ." She began to illustrate, but Hob said:

"What a shame! He's ragging—those two ladies. The housekeepers, are they?" He left her, and with a solemn dancing step walked towards Jimmy.

How rude he was! Dido for the moment was still, her

gaze on him. Then she went towards them all, her eyes lowered, her expression discreet.

Jimmy was speaking to Miss Wilson. He was not "ragging" her. He was addressing her with a quite perfect disregard of her position there as housekeeper.

"Don't you really have much chance of playing?" he said. "That's bad. It's a good game."

Dido remembered her last capture of Miss Wilson's reality and secret agitations. She felt now as if she and her companions stood on one shore and looked across a gulf at Miss Wilson and Miss Hyde, enigmatical and strange on another. But the kitchen, bronze-colored beside the weak kindlings of the moon in the night beyond, and the two women near her, and her own rush to meet something unknown and yet most passionately universal, hung vivid in her mind. The gulf was narrowing. She had a stimulating apprehension of an impending impact between herself and Miss Wilson.

Miss Wilson pressed the locket so convulsively that its thin sides dipped and swelled again with a sharp popping noise. She looked at Jimmy as if her eyes were held to his by an irresistible fascination.

"Yes, it is," she said. "But I haven't much time. I'm not a very good player. I do get a game sometimes, but"—her eyes wandered into a sidelong and downward glance—"I don't expect to be able to play." She cleared her throat. Her thin, pink lips quivered. Her eyes continued obliquely to study the path, but she had an air of attentive listening. A soft, rosy glow lightly moved under her delicately lined skin.

“Oh, you must try and get a game,” Jimmy said, with a practical and pleasant glance. “Very good exercise.” He moved away. “You’ve tired me out, I know that, young man,” he said to Hob. “Of course a boy like you—you can keep it up indefinitely, but I’m mature. I don’t disguise it. And Miss Baird too—you young people—you’re too much for a delicate middle-aged man. Eh?” He turned to Marie.

She was looking from Dido to Hob, seriously, with again that air of stillness and reserve. She answered Jimmy without moving her eyes from Hob.

“Oh, we assessed you long ago, Jimmy, age, accomplishments, and all. You’re no longer a problem.” She laughed with sudden enjoyment, but her eyes still eagerly asked Hob for some response which he firmly and without clumsiness withheld. He looked round the garden with an admirable effect of mental repose.

Dido, strolling a little in the rear, reflected with a kind of lazy ease. Something was, if not worrying, at least perplexing Marie; and Jimmy, now rather loudly and decidedly expressing his sympathy with the working-classes, suggested the almost irritable tension of adherence to a pre-determined mode of action; he was becoming aggressive as if through unexpected impact with obstacles not dreamt of; and Mr. Ramsay—Dido hung briefly in consideration, then leapt at the word—evasive: that described Mr. Ramsay. With his glance, teasing or blank, his airy walk, he impressed her with the idea of movement, of tactical flights, swerves, and advances. He seemed entirely master of himself, and somehow out of reach.

Lightly over the lawn Dido moved, unthinking now and receptive. Once she turned and saw Miss Hyde and Miss Wilson pacing along the path, she caught the flutter of Miss Hyde's hands and the stir of her face dim and pale amid the shade which brownly smeared the rims of the garden. On her bright vacuity a thought came like a cloud—how isolated they looked; morally how far off! Miss Wilson was glancing this way.

Jimmy had stopped talking. There was now no sound in the garden. The horizons were smudged and cold, only the west, burnt down to rusty red, looked smokeless, strong, beyond the mists which steamed over Brend Hill. The sky seemed to be floating downwards like a smoke, and the light that still lingered seemed diffused by the swarthy oval of the Green and by the fallow fields. The figures in the garden had subtly changed. They looked small and slow and weak. In their movements there was no power. A sense of immense futility momentarily oppressed her. Why was she moving, why did they all solemnly pace forward? Inexplicable mystery! How absurd they all were, pointless, pretentious! How tiny those sitting in the chairs looked, little, pointed, rigid things amid the fields wandering spaciouly away into the fog and silence and emptiness under the round stare of that sky, those large, unsteady stars.

She was smothered by the fields, crushed by the regard of sky and star, buried away beyond sight, beyond reach, by the darkness.

Then across the greenish-yellow irradiation of the lawn she met Hilda's eyes. In a few moments she would be alone with Hilda in the bedroom, exchanging impressions.

The house awaited them, protective, bright. Bed, a little read of that American humorist—or, write to mother, tell her what fun it was here—then sleep.

Dido began to hum softly.

V

Later, in the bedroom, those confidences with Hilda started.

“I like Mrs. Jesson,” Hilda said, her face mildly shining on Dido from between the two long falls of her hair. She took a hair-brush off the dressing-table.

“I saw you were talking. What did she say?”

“Oh, she told me all about America, and her sisters, and one friend who’s a Christian Scientist and another who’s an Agnostic. She doesn’t believe in either. I told her I didn’t. And about Marie. I imagine she’s afraid of Marie.”

“Wise Hilda! I told you that the first day.”

“I know you did. You see everything so quickly, Dido. I think she liked talking.”

“And liked you too, of course,” Dido said. She tried to picture Mrs. Jesson in the chair, but instead another picture formed, evoked by Hilda’s words—Mrs. Jesson moving towards them, desirous of contact, having the air of one bearing a burden and anxious to be relieved.

Dido expressed this feeling simply.

“She wants to be friendly. Poor old thing. How people do like to pour out their hearts to you! What do you think of Mr. Ramsay?”

“He seemed very nice.”

Dido turned and deliberately looked at Hilda. Something in her expression made Hilda have a little outbreak of conscious, meaningless laughter.

“What does that mean?” Dido demanded.

“Nothing, nothing.” Hilda was very earnest. “It was the way you looked at me. Do you mean anything?”

They gazed at each other across the wavering lemon-colored light of the room. Involuntarily both ceased moving, Hilda with the hair-brush, Dido with the fastening of her blouse. In the house there was no sound, but there floated up from the verandah to the little window behind Hilda laughter and voices. They distinguished the words “The system of relativity . . .” The voice was Hob’s.

Dido laughed, sparkling a little. “Of course I don’t mean anything, not, at least, anything profound. Only he was extremely rude to me—I didn’t exist—I was thin air—and he smiled at you and looked at you. I mean that you’re the favorite.”

“What nonsense!” Hilda laughed, looked out candidly and gladly at Dido, and then shook her hair over her face, and began to brush vigorously.

Dido continued to watch her, not thinking, but listening to the voices on the verandah. Slowly pictures formed in her mind; she saw Hilda in the camp-chair and Hob smiling at her.

A little chill fell upon her. Pensively she lifted her hands to her hair, feeling for hairpins. Her gaze, still resting on Hilda, became cold.

Hilda parted her hair and showed her serious face.

“If he was rude, it must have been because he was shy,”

she said. "I should think you would be the favorite with any one."

Consciousness of the nature of her own emotions stabbed Dido. She had been jealous. Oh, how abominable! She rushed into fervent speech, her eyes caressing Hilda.

"How absurd! I shall hate him if he doesn't admire you."

They laughed, looking at each other, no cloud between them. Then Hilda again covered her flaming face with her hair. In a voice broken by nervous laughter she said:

"That Miss Hammond spoke to me." She repeated Miss Hammond's remarks.

Dido, her hands idle in her lap, listened to her, and listened to the sounds rising in the house. Footsteps came up the stairs, paused at the end of the passage, and Mrs. Jesson's voice was audible.

"Asleep, Bessie?"

Faintly Dido heard Miss Hammond reply, "No, I'm not."

"Are you all right?"

"Quite, thank you."

A pause, and then, "May I come in, Bessie?"

"Yes, come in."

A door squeaked; she heard it closed. The strong voice and the breathless one, small and high, like the little cry of an animal, were no longer to be heard. More footsteps up the stairs, Miss Hyde's voice:

"Oh, I'm only tired. I shall be all right in the morning when I've had my salts. They do me a world of good. I shall be all right when I've had them. They cleanse the stomach so. That's all I want. You don't look as if you

want anything. You do look bright. I hope you're not going to have anything. They say you always look extra well just before you're going to be bad."

Miss Wilson's laugh. "I don't think it's that with me. I feel—well, bright." Again her laugh.

More robust laughter from the verandah drowned Miss Hyde's further's remarks. Dido stared at the door.

Just beyond it, life; a deep, strong tide of emotion moving there beyond that thin barrier of wood. She knew, without analyzing or even fully realizing her certitude, that the tide was to sweep through the door and invade the room, and submerge herself and Hilda. They would be in the heart of it—some day.

And the unconscious belief pervaded her with hopefulness. She began to answer Hilda. She thought she was concentrated on her own words and Hilda's, but the profound parts of her being were silent, listening for the advance of that other life towards her own.

PART II

DIDO

CHAPTER I

INSIGHTS

EVERY evening during the next four days Hobart Ramsay came to St. Hubert's. Once, at Marie's invitation, he came to dinner: on the other occasions he appeared after the meal.

He sat with Marie on the end of the lawn near the house, but he looked at Dido and Hilda in their chairs under the trees at the farther end, and they knew it; crochet, reading, conversation were carried on with a deeper emphasis, nonchalantly, to conceal from each other, and from those two figures, their keen awareness of the glances momentarily given them.

"Is it both of us, or only one?" Dido thought.

When they came down the garden, Hob spoke to them; he propounded some controversial question, and then, in the dialogue which followed, seemed definitely to answer Dido's wonder. It was Hilda whom he addressed. He was natural with her, merry, and approving.

"I really believe he does admire her," Dido thought. "He glares stonily at me, but he looks at her as if he appreciates her goodness. It must be that, because she certainly isn't brilliant with him. Well . . . he ought to appreciate her, though why he need snub me is rather bewildering. How exciting if he falls in love with Hilda!"

Very exciting, of course, and much to be desired. Yes. Hilda was so good.

Yet Dido, sitting or standing beside them all, did not feel excited; she felt uneasy, most strangely full of incertitudes, apprehensions, and intuitive impressions. Both at the time and afterwards she refrained from any analysis and synthesis of her feelings. She fled from these with an unacknowledged sense that they were culpable. Wonder that Hob should admire Hilda, a cold almost hostile examination of Hilda, an unwilling but irresistible study of Hob, the feeling that Marie was watching her, that Mrs. Jesson was watching her, that, inexplicably, she, not Hilda, had inspired a vigilance, a deep mistrust, a developing tension of atmosphere—these things altered for Dido the whole look of the house, of the land, of life itself.

She thought that her emotions were incommunicable in their absurdity, but though she did not mention them to Hilda nor in her letters to her mother, she constantly indulged them; only their implications were avoided by her.

Hob was intelligent, rather charming, and sufficiently subtle to retain the interest he had awakened. He talked well. Not to her; a flatness came in his voice and manner whenever he was forced to listen to or answer her, but with Marie, and especially with Hilda, he briskly brought out opinions, intentional absurdities, revelations of mood and traits. Actually he was not uncommon, not very clever, nor original, nor, essentially, subtle, but Dido had met few men of his age; she had only Jimmy Ainger and Tommy Lucas to contrast him with. Dido, admirably indifferent and cool, told herself that she liked him; he really seemed

good enough—for Hilda. Hilda must have some one so frightfully good.

He liked country life. "Certainly I wouldn't stop in town for choice," he answered a question of Hilda's. "Oh yes, people do, when they needn't. I admit that. But it's because they haven't sufficient imagination to picture any other kind of life."

He appeared vague on psycho-analysis, confessed, indeed, to complete ignorance, and called Professor Freud's philosophy, as meagerly explained by Dido, "poisonous stuff."

He was rather vague, too, on books. Robert Louis Stevenson he had read and Thackeray and Trollope, and a few modern novels—they too were "poisonous." But music he loved; he talked with Hilda, who here was more animated, being in a beloved sphere, of Mozart and Beethoven, Brahms, Wagner, Gluck, the position of the English Opera, the "popular" taste, all the theories and agitations and ideals of the modern musical world. "The public will take better stuff if they're given it," he maintained. "A lot of these working-fellows have a quite surprising taste—in music and in drama. Suburban culture. Yes, we laugh at it. I know we do. We're awfully amused when Derrick or—or Cora gets a high-brow book out of the circulating library, or say the pictures aren't enough for them and go to a repertory play, but it's a good instinct. It is. I say 'carry on, old fellow.' It's such thundering nonsense to assert that the people make their own music, that all the rot is poured out because they're yelling for it. They aren't. They take what's given them. And an astonishing number of them know it's putrid stuff."

Dido, considering his remarks afterwards, never discovered that he had said anything very profound, but she imagined that she had glimpsed his code of conduct and she approved it. She thought that he was scrupulous and idealistic; perceptive; mentally supple because he seemed so perfectly to capture the charm of Mrs. Jesson's age and naïveté and goodness, the rather tragic humor of Miss Wilson and Miss Hyde, the peculiar fragrance of Hilda's dissimilarity to Marie, to Miss Bessant, to so many other women. She discerned too the presence in all his moods of a conscious criticism; he looked at the women as if valuing them by their harmony or discord with some secret formula. And he was so constantly independent; he seemed impenetrable to the subversive influences of sentiment or romance; he never talked at random; he was almost amusing in his magnificent self-control, in his obvious feeling of freedom.

All these things Dido discovered in him.

And at the same time her brain incessantly speculated over Marie. Did Marie think Hob was coming to the house to see her? Had he originally come with that intention and then been distracted from her by Hilda? Marie was charming; she splendidly fenced with him, laughed, argued, gave him her gleaming long glances; but she had too, and with growing frequency, moments of temper when she arrogantly threw down her convictions for her companions' refusal or acceptance, contemptuously disregarding their response, and changing the subject, sometimes coldly, sometimes impatiently. Then she had moments of intense, careful thought, her gaze wandering over their faces, her mature, just, troubled gaze. Why did she look like that, her body

still, her breathing very slow and deep? And why—how Dido incessantly cried this in her accumulating reveries!—why did Marie always come at last to Dido and there remain, inscrutably intent, as if in Dido lay her problem, her solution, her danger? The coldness and dignity of her slow withdrawal into apparent forgetfulness of Dido sank into the girl's mind with the force of a physical blow. Marie seemed proudly to have pressed her back beyond the radius of Marie's own existence; she felt, morally, extinct. And yet she knew, it was her one tremendous certitude, that Marie had not so demolished her; that she still oppressed Marie, haunting her like a ghost which was not to be exorcised.

She felt as keenly Mrs. Jesson's inspection. Perhaps she felt it more keenly because it was less discreet, less unfathomable. Discreet! Unfathomable! Mrs. Jesson almost ferociously assailed her with it; she stood, conspicuous, threatening, exhibiting to Dido her hostility, her preparedness. But for what was she prepared? Why did she, when they were talking on the lawn, come to the window and fasten her somber and angry eyes on Dido? maintaining that position, that stare, for a period which, to Dido's narrow glance, seemed an eternity; or if she sat with them, still openly watch Dido, as somberly, as angrily, but disclosing also, through her nearness, a look of heroic courage as if she gazed on some inevitable issue, dreadful but resolutely to be faced? During the day, too, when Dido and Hilda were in the garden, playing tennis, or reading, she appeared on the verandah and there stood for a while, a troublous and yet defensive figure, watching Dido, without in the least trying to attenuate the strength of her scrutiny.

"I can't understand it," Dido thought. "If they want Mr. Ramsay for Marie and are angry, why don't they glare at Hilda? Why me?"

She felt the stir of a possible solution, divined its outline slowly breaking to her, and mentally she averted her gaze, she smothered the sound of it by a voiceless cry. Dear Hilda, mild, complacent, unsuspecting; how she hoped Hilda would always be most wonderfully happy!

Miss Bessant was with them for two days only out of the four. She then returned to town.

In her place Marie had for companion Jimmy Ainger.

Mr. Ainger was a prosperous landowner. He did very little work himself, going round his farms in a neat trap before Marie's advent, and now, Dido silently commented, spending most of his time walking with Marie when she went to the Rowe Green Stores, or talking to her on the lawn, or, fluently and with varying degrees of sense, from the edge of her bed when he thought the verandah cooler. He did not, like Hob, come only in the evening; he came in the morning and stayed to lunch, and in the afternoon, when he danced to meet Miss Wilson and the tea-tray, securing the tray with gestures of gallantry and deference, his wide-open, staring black eyes fixed on her face, which reddened and quivered feebly as she submitted to him.

Marie laughed at him. She received his serious implications as to his presence there with an impertinently slow look and a roll of her eyes away from him to some far-off point on the horizon. Dido and Hilda rarely joined them, but they discussed between themselves the shades of expression and posture they had observed across the garden.

It was the only matter connected with the Jessons which they did discuss. They never spoke of Hob. They had come to have long silences with each other. Dido covertly watched Hilda; she knew that Hilda felt herself to be under examination, and was embarrassed, was fluttered. Often when they were alone together, Hilda, dimly flushed, gave to Dido her simple, almost scared gaze, and then looked away, keeping still, dumb, with the timid and prudent look of one surrounded by delicately adjusted thunderbolts which a breath, a motion, would disturb. Her placidity was shaken. She had apprehensive starts, dilations of eye, sudden compressions of mouth. For several hours she would appear happy, even looking, with her smooth, full face, smugly satisfied, but invariably she came out of these silences, these musings, with an intelligent and disquieted air. Then she gazed at Dido, not simperingly, but earnestly, her brows arched high in question, her face somehow conveying the fact of her complete accessibility, her readiness, her desire, to respond to any urgency.

And Dido could not press her. Dido felt alone, and her loneliness was imposed on her; she hated it, but it was beyond her retention or destruction; she had passively to suffer it. How had it descended on her? She did not know. One moment and she, spiritually, had been linked with Hilda, moving towards Mrs. Jesson, towards Miss Wilson and Miss Hyde, painlessly recognizing her perfect, and perhaps endless, separation from Marie—and the next moment she was swept away from them all, alone, inflexibly still. It was horrible. To see Hilda mutely calling her, and to feel that those invocations came without power, without strength,

across an immense distance; that Hilda actually a few feet away from her, physically to be touched and held, was in another sphere, was lost to her, unessential—horrible sensation. What had awakened it in her?

And Mrs. Jesson. Here her feelings were different. She liked Mrs. Jesson; she respected her, softly pitied her, and Mrs. Jesson was passionately receding from her, shrinking as if contact was a possibility not to be endured, trying to disengage herself and Marie completely from the atmosphere of Dido's mere physical existence? Why? Why?

Vast stretches of solitude surrounded Dido. Dry, inhuman shapes of hill and woodland lusterlessly regarded her. The stars could have been imagined as rattling like pieces of steel in an iron sky. And on the rims of her isolation moved figures, strange, fantastic, mysterious shadows, gesticulating in some secret and personal action, inaccessible; Miss Hyde, contented, incessantly active, Miss Wilson with a peculiar look of intensity and dream, Miss Hammond brooding over her indefinite delusion, Hilda on the verge of union with another—Hob's—personality. And how fundamentally alone they all were! Between them there was no complete understanding. At any moment their imperfect contacts might be broken and they would all be drifting, far apart, solitary—as she was.

Was perfect union, then, impossible? Was there for every human being some point of existence to be reached when they would discover that no one could accompany them, that no one even could distinguish the track they must follow; some moment of realized aloneness and remoteness?

Then she thought of her mother and father. She was happy again.

But still she was not touching Hilda. She increased her dialogues with Hilda, she beamed on her, she sometimes strolled arm-in-arm; but her heart, her mind, stood cold, firm in isolation.

CHAPTER II

TENSION

I

ON the fifth day Marie arranged a bridge party. Jimmy and Hob came after tea, for tennis; Mrs. Everett, Tommy Lucas, and one or two others were to join them after dinner.

Dido and Hilda were indoors when Marie and her companions came off the verandah and walked towards the shade of the pergola, but they were getting books together to take into the garden, and when the other group reached the end of the pergola the cousins were seated on the lawn.

Marie glanced at them. Involuntarily she paused. In front of her were Hob and her mother. Jimmy was beside her; in the rear, carrying a basket of stockings to be darned, and having an air of deliberate detachment, was Miss Hammond.

Marie quickly moved forward. Standing before Hob she arrested his progress.

“A suggestion!” she cried. “I don’t feel like tennis. I’ll take you men up Hirst Hill and introduce you to some protégés of mine. It’s an old couple living in a tiny hut just at the foot of the hill—on the Hirstwood side. They’re perfectly charming. Dickens might have drawn them. They’re absolutely prehistoric—neither of them can read nor

write, but the old man has a repertoire of folk-songs, and he *can* be prevailed upon to sing them. I can make him, anyhow." She linked her hands, laughing over their pale bridge at Hob. "I imagine I'm about the only person who can stimulate him to any exhibition of life at all. He exists usually in a state of—what's the word . . ." She merrily frowned. "Oh! What is it?"

"Coma?" Hob offered her.

"That's it. But he becomes absolutely flirtatious with me and sings me anything. Do you know 'My Son Henery—Henery my Son?'"

"I never zeed the zame, ma'am," Hob replied.

"Oh, it's lovely! You shall hear it to-night. It will be far more fun than tennis."

Hob assumed an air of coyness. "Not for me. I'm so shy."

"Nonsense." Marie still smiled, but her hands became still, her eyes fixed. She waited for his next remark.

Dido's glance rose from a book and came, penetrating, veiled, to them all. She saw Marie's back and quiet head, Hob, smiling at Marie and yet somehow looking implacable, Jimmy, Mrs. Jesson, Miss Hammond, all motionless, all watching Marie.

She dropped her eyes. She listened to Hob's words.

"It's too much of an ordeal. The real, original folk-songs rendered by the real, original old folks at home—it's too good for the likes of me. No." He shook his head. "I won't," he cried, flouncing his shoulders. "I won't."

Marie did not laugh. Her lips had set; they looked flat and withered between her swollen cheeks. She stared at

Hob, her eyes hard and polished like stones. For an instant she did not speak.

Dido was suddenly amazed to find her hands trembling on her book. She gazed at them. As if they expressed some agitating fact, her heart began to beat, her breath to come quickly. Good gracious, what did this excitement mean?

The silence was profound, but it was not the silence of repose, nor dream; it was portentous; she had no vision of inertia; it was swift, culminating movement which she visualized; she waited for the crash of an impact.

Her gaze was dragged from her book again. Mrs. Jesson's hands sprawling against a dark dress, twitching, suggesting power and the ability to do violence; Mrs. Jesson's dilating nostrils, her eyes glassily dark, and locked to Marie's face; by her, looking from her to Marie, Miss Hammond resting the work-basket on the ridge of her high, bulging stomach, the stir of her eyes like the flutter of a caged thing round the confines of its prison, her expression oddly one of profounder intelligence as though she regarded the scene from some point nearer to absolute truth than theirs, Jimmy, staring at Marie, his mouth compressed, his air that of a man facing with philosophical phlegm a demonstration of our essential impotence, Hob, extremely easy and firm, with the ease allowed by a lapse of perceptiveness, the firmness of callous and selfish youth—every detail was observed by Dido.

She lowered her eyes. How supreme was that feeling of movement! Oh, she was speeding down to them through those abysses of solitude; they, set like a group of statuary

in the colorless, diffused light of a low, a cloudy, sky, wheeled round each other, some converging, some threatening a complete disintegration of relationship. But predominant was the feeling of a general convergence to some point. They were all in it—*that* was the feeling. In what? Why, in the atmosphere of sympathy or hostility raised by Marie. She, Dido, was in it now. Oh, she dropped into it—plumb! It swirled in waves about her ears.

And now, this intense moment past, Marie was speaking.

Marie's voice was level, it suggested irritation but not defeat. It still had the coolness of an imperturbable self-confidence.

"How absurd!" Marie said. "They won't take any notice of you. They'll merely sing to please me, and you'll have the benefit of my tact and attractions!" She burst out laughing. Her glance grew good-natured again. Contemplating her own conception of herself, she again seemed convinced of ultimate harmony and success.

Hob shook his head. "I dursen't," he said. "I dursen't."

He smiled at them all. Stepping out of the group, he crossed the lawn to Dido and Hilda. They glanced up, smiling at him, Hilda conscious and almost laughing, Dido with a look of inflexible reserve.

He fixed his fair, intelligent eyes on Dido. He continued to smile. "May I suggest myself for your partner?" he said. "You haven't, by any chance, made up your mind to finish that book, I hope? You will play?"

Dido had a moment of what seemed like a complete suspension of life. She seemed to hang, passive, fatalistic, in a kind of intermediate realm between one existence and an-

other; she felt herself move there and hang, with the sense of a discarded existence drifting round her like a corpse, and another, brilliant and beautiful, waiting, like a garment, to be assumed.

The next moment she was established, firm, faintly gasping, in that new, that incredible, existence. She looked—nay, she had not ceased to look at Hob!—but she looked now at him as if for the first time his reality was manifested to her. Beautifully she touched him. How close they were. Sitting there under his soft intimate gaze she felt herself meeting him.

These impressions became reduced to words.

“It isn’t Hilda. It’s me.”

She hadn’t a doubt. It wasn’t a delusion of vanity, nor an assumption of avid sentimentality; it was clairvoyance. She knew.

Very happily she laughed. “Yes, I’ll play.” She stood up. She looked at his eyes with a fresh but discreet glance. “I’m always willing to play. Haven’t you discovered it’s a craze with me?”

“Oh, there are a great many things I haven’t discovered about you,” he said. “You aren’t obvious. You’re very—very”—he paused with an air of chagrin—“very obscure. Horrid.”

She laughed. “How interesting that must make me!”

“Aggravating,” he corrected. “It’s disgusting. I don’t like it. I don’t think you’re a nice person for me to know.”

Dido laughed again, she made a quick little movement with her shoulders, as she opened her mouth to speak, but higher, longer, than her own laughter, came Hilda’s.

Dido was checked. Hilda. Marie. All of them. But first, Hilda.

She turned breathlessly to Hilda.

Smoothly Hilda's glance came to her. Widely with her cloudless young eyes she conveyed the extent of her amusement. She hadn't seen anything. For an instant Dido wondered over Hilda's perhaps enviable imperceptiveness. Then she looked at the others.

She looked at them across Hob's shoulders, having an underlying sense of his long, equal figure intervened between her and them. She met the scrutiny of their eyes.

Miss Hammond's pale stare, Mrs. Jesson's, grim, intrepid, Jimmy's quite blank, Marie's.

Marie and Dido looked at each other.

In Marie's gaze there was no emotion, no shadow. It lay dreamily on Dido; she seemed to look through Dido, beyond her; in her attitude there was a fine grace and strength, an equanimity crushing in its effect. Dido admired her.

"Oh, she can act," Dido thought, kindling with appreciation. "But I'm awfully sorry for Mrs. Jesson."

Marie moved her gaze away; she bent her broad head a little, she smiled. This movement, this smile, disfigured her. She looked old and insolent. Deliberately she intimated her enjoyment over the aspect of the scene as she saw it, and she subtly evoked for them all an aspect which was ugly, which was gross.

Dido grew crimson. She could not conceal her anger with Marie for the cynical suggestiveness of that smile. Jimmy walked away towards Miss Wilson, who had come up with a basket and who was picking beans for dinner.

He addressed her, staring at the beans. "You're busy. Are they good?"

"Yes, yes—I think they are—very good."

"Hmm. That's right. Very good things—beans."

Jimmy was uneasy. He turned and glanced at Marie; his little black eyes seemed to stand rigidly in his broad face, his brows seemed fairly to repudiate either responsibility or criticism.

Through silence, through the pure, thin, and pervasive light, Marie walked towards him.

"Help me tighten the net, Jimmy," she said.

"Delighted—delighted. I warn you—I'm in fine form to-night. The Old Man's Youth by William de Morgan. Miss Nicholls, I charge half a crown for the grand-stand. It's worth it. You are going to witness the resurrection of my early vigor. Oyes—Oyes—Oyes."

Jimmy splendidly helped them all. Marie laughed; Mrs. Jesson, with a vague look, took a few steps towards the path; Hob spun round to Hilda, who was still smiling in wonderful ignorance.

"These premature crowings—rotten, aren't they?" he said. He returned to Dido, he pressed her with his roguish gaze. His eyes warmed.

She couldn't mistake it. She had a feeling of him as being almost frostily governed by reason and principle in his general relationships; she remembered her past impressions of his distance and keenness, his look of a healthy cool temperature, and this new, fervid glance made her want to close her eyes.

She stepped away from him with a short little laugh. She

went down the garden, obeying some unconscious knowledge that she must change her shoes. She saw the grass, beamlessly producing an effect of light, the house very sharp-cut, and as if projected out of an even width of smoke, so dark and soft the sky hung behind it, but consciously she was not aware of them. Her mental gaze was fixed on Hilda, on Mrs. Jesson, on Marie, and, transiently, on Miss Hammond. She was very much involved with them all. She couldn't think how, at present. It was quite impossible to think at all about anything. But they surrounded her, held her, asked unfathomable things of her. She had a tremendous sense of the exigencies of her position.

Then the event no longer had an almost august appearance. Why in the world did she feel so excited? Merely because Mr. Ramsay had spoken to her, had looked at her, instead of devoting himself to Hilda.

"But he hasn't *devoted* himself to Hilda. He was simply nicer to her than he was to me. Really we had no justification for thinking him in love with her. Oh, I do hope she doesn't think he is. I'm not in love with him. But I like him. If he does decide that he likes me sufficiently to . . . I think I could like him well enough . . . But does Hilda think he meant anything?"

In the hall she met Miss Wilson and Miss Hyde. They had just come in through the porch, Miss Hyde from the village, Miss Wilson from the garden.

Miss Wilson was laughing. Oh, that feeling of detachment was vanquished now! Dido smiled at the two women. She was glad they were there. As they stood close to her in the hall so they stood on the circle of her orbit, shelter-

ing her from the chill infinity beyond. Never to be pressed beyond that ring of sympathetic and kindly people: she desired this.

They were smiling at her, but—how queer they looked!

Color stood in patches over Miss Wilson's slightly sunken and tragic cheeks; her eyes were bright, even wild; their soft stir, and the stir of her lips and of her hands, combined with the tremor of the weak frillings round her rather aged body, suggested an agitation deep but exquisite. Incredulity was in her girlish stare but a delicate complacency in the pose of her head. She exhibited to Dido the wonder and beauty of her own existence. Dido's existence! Miss Wilson realized that only as she divined its power to perceive and be impressed by her own reality. Dido, all of them, were the shadowy, similar, interested figures which circled Miss Wilson's sphere. Actually, people were real and essential only to themselves. To others they were featureless members of that surrounding ring.

Dear, how mysterious and impressive Miss Hyde looked! What was the matter with her? She was silent, an unique fact. She gazed at Miss Wilson and then away, faintly shaking her head as if to free it from some consequence of an invisible and imponderable sort, moving her mouth, and involuntarily tightening on her basket her flat, blue-gloved hands. Her eyes, into whose brightness had come a darker and more liquid quality, gazed sadly; she had the look of one shifted suddenly from the warm comforting light of illusion into the untender dullness of reality.

No one spoke. Dido went upstairs, the others to the kitchen.

The bedroom lay like a gray pool, empty and smooth, before Dido. Hilda's bed. Hilda's chair.

Dido stopped.

"Oh dear, oh dear," she said audibly.

She was frightened by the room. It was tenacious; the things in it gave her a masterful stare. More than any other room it commanded her; she couldn't discard it; she must always come to it at last and be profoundly involved in its peculiar emotional dream-laden atmosphere—the atmosphere Hilda had created.

Guiltily and quietly she advanced into it, keeping her eyes on the tennis shoes, set side by side under her bed.

II

While they played tennis Mrs. Jesson watered the garden, cut off dead flowers, repeated the instructions she had already given Miss Wilson about the dinner and about the refreshments to be offered to the bridge-players, wandered through the rooms staring vacantly round them, stood without movement, staring at nothing.

And with every action, every pause, her unhappiness grew. She could not think; there was a great inquietude in her head; names, faces, revolved there but never achieved coherence; she felt as if she were stumbling through endless vistas of darkness. She was alone in them. She forgot that she had ever had times of companionship. Incalculable periods of solitude seemed to reach away behind her, seemed to be before her. There burned in her a dull resentment. She endured a feeling of having lived always unrecognized;

no one, not even Henry, had ever reached her. Through spaces of her existence they had passed, but always there had been an undivined realm where the very essence of her nature dwelt alone, made, through isolation, ineffective.

There was no hand she could grasp now, no stable thing she could rest on, no star she could move by.

This phase passed. She became able to think; she sat on the verandah in long, silent communion with herself.

Mr. Ramsay did not want Marie. He wanted Dido.

Either Marie had made a mistake, and he had never been as passionate as she imagined, or else he with the first sight of Dido had discovered that Marie was too old for him, that his infatuation was purely sensuous.

But it was Dido he admired. He had shown Marie that. Marie knew it. He was lost; Marie wouldn't marry him.

"I want her to marry so. I like him. I was so glad to think she was going to marry him. She never said she loved him, but it isn't her way; she isn't demonstrative. I'm sure—she must love him—though she don't show it. She's hurt, she's suffering. I know she is. And he—deliberately—refused her so that he could stay with that girl."

She passed her tongue over her teeth. Her doubled hands pressed hardly on her knees. She stared at Dido, seeing Dido's tall, white-clad figure as something inhuman, swift, victorious, free, darting about the lawn like a flame, white and consuming.

"I knew it. I saw it coming. I feared it from the first. He looked at her when he thought she wouldn't notice. He can't have loved Marie. It was only a young man's infatuation. . . . And I can't do anything. I'm her mother; I

love her; I want to shield her from everything; and I can't do anything. I must sit by and see her suffer. . . . O God, tell me what to do to help her. . . . Don't let her keep away from me. She's so hard. She never thinks of what I feel, of all I fear. If she told me. But my love isn't sufficient. She don't want anything I can give her."

A long experience of darkness, of fixed staring at the inexorable truth, and then the slow return to percipience, the recognition of Dido's figure set there, immutable, dreadful, in the equal light.

"If he'd never seen Miss Baird he'd have had Marie. Coming round here every day he couldn't have helped loving her. He'd have asked her to marry him. Now he won't. He made it quite plain."

She heard a sound behind her, but it was meaningless and remote; she did not turn. When Miss Hammond passed her and then stopped and gazed, a cup and saucer and a plate in either hand, a blue steam from the cup rising to her circular, damp face, she stared at Miss Hammond without sight, her look unconsciously black.

"I thought I'd bring my supper out here," Miss Hammond said, still gazing, her lids without a quiver, her eyes, white, still, like the eyes of an image. "It's so hot indoors."

Mrs. Jesson rubbed her upper lip roughly. "Have you got all you want, Bessie?" She stared at the cup of cocoa, and at the high pile of bread-and-butter.

"Yes, thank you. Shall I be in the way here?"

"No; sit here."

Miss Hammond sat down, a piece of crockery on either knee.

"Does your head ache?" she asked.

"No. Why? What made you think it did, Bessie?"

"I thought you looked tired, that's all. And you are sitting down. You're generally so busy. So nice to be busy. Always looking after people."

"That's a woman's life, Bessie, looking after people. Or it's a mother's. . . . I am tired. Tired and afraid."

Up and down her thick knees traveled her thick, rosy hands. She gazed at Brend Hill brimming up to the confused sky, thrusting its bald brow out above the livid roads and ponds, and the desire for self-expression became intense. Inchoate impressions of distance, space, austerity, of a beauty too wild and infinite to have relevance, of the nearness and similitude of Bessie's figure, came to her. Words babbled in her mind, words which should make for ever brilliant and ineffaceable the fact of her existence, all its complexity, depth, happiness, and despair.

Then Bessie spoke. "What are you afraid of?"

Bessie had become quite motionless. She held her cup half-way to her mouth. She had bent back her head, and the little round straw hat she wore, sunk to her shoulders, ringed like a rather tight halo the arched disk of her face.

Mrs. Jesson thought: "That was a silly thing to say. Now I've frightened Bessie." Aloud she replied in a strong voice: "Nothing, Bessie dear. Now don't get any fancies into your head that I meant anything. I only meant that it had come over me that I couldn't expect to get through life without trouble—disappointment, and loneliness. I didn't mean anything else. Now don't get thinking I did or

I shall be afraid to say anything to you. There, I said afraid then. It's a figure of speech, you see."

Miss Hammond lowered the cup to its saucer. She faintly smiled. "Very well, I won't. Don't worry. I'm sure no trouble will come to you. So good and kind. Anything we can do to help you? Such a lot you've done for me. Can't I do anything . . . ?"

Buried now as an impossibility, even as a fault, was that longing to speak, to confide. Mrs. Jesson saw only with any clearness the pathetic reality of this old woman, strove only to perceive and allay all the phantoms in whose company Miss Hammond daily lived. "All you can do is to be quite happy, Bessie, and know you're quite safe, and that we love you. That's all we want you to do."

"So kind of you. I'm so grateful. I can't say—how much." Miss Hammond smiled. Her eyes moved round to the tennis-players, stealthily and cautiously. Then she fixed them on space. She began to eat the bread-and-butter.

Mrs. Jesson did not speak again. She sat, watching the tennis, until presently the gong for dinner sounded. Then she went indoors, leaving Miss Hammond still eating with appetite, sitting bundled up in the chair, her broad feet turned to each other, her round-eyed gaze on her plate, her appearance, her attitude, contemplative and impassive like an image of Buddha.

Dinner allowed but little time for thought. Mrs. Jesson had to join in the conversation. She was almost terrified by the harsh, warning stare Marie had given her when she

entered the room in front of the men. Mrs. Jesson understood. "Dare to humiliate me by betraying your chagrin and I'll . . ." That was what Marie darted at her mother. Mrs. Jesson preserved a frozen control over herself all through the meal. She smiled at Hob, she spoke to him, in her silences she stared at the things on the table; they were weights which retained her in this world of the instant. But when at last every one went on to the verandah, the housemaid taking the tea there, for it was hot and airless in the room, she received no smile of thanks from Marie. Marie, talking, laughing, moving her hands, passed without a glance, without, obviously, any sense of the presence of a helper.

Mrs. Jesson looked after her. She made no attempt to follow.

"You're coming, Mrs. Jesson?" Hob called.

"Yes." Mrs. Jesson strode towards him, powerful, virile, with an indomitable and artless face. She came close to him and the chair he was arranging for her. She looked at his face, wanly narrow in the dusk, and her own did not reflect the desire, the pain, the unscrupulous seduction of her heart. She appeared aggressive, keen. She seemed, in defiance of all the social conventions, to menace him with a concentrated anger, to exhibit to him the sorrow he had imposed on her.

And all the time she was feeling how she liked him, she was endeavoring to dominate him. She hadn't, at that moment, any religion, no sense of law, nor responsibility. She felt unrestrained, subject to nothing but the elemental and passionate dictates of her own heart.

"Mother!" Marie rang out the word. "Here's your tea. Do make her sit down, Hob."

Mrs. Jesson's disquieted eyes rolled round. She received Marie's savage look. She sat down and made little ridges in her skirt and rubbed them between finger and thumb. When Hob brought her tea she was able to smile and say:

"I believe we're going to have a storm. It's very hot."

And rapping, rapping in her head with a kind of insistent ferocity were the words: "How hard she is! How hard she is!"

Soon afterwards Mrs. Everett and Tommy Lucas came. They all went into the drawing-room.

Mrs. Jesson did not play. She sat on the chesterfield and mended a pair of Marie's silk stockings. For a little while Mrs. Everett sat with her.

She listened to Mrs. Everett, her eyes fixed on her needle, and presently out of the words which fell on her ears, there shaped gradually for her the vision of a spirit facing the problems she faced, moving in the same spheres, finite, perplexed, weak. Again there surged in her the desire to make articulate her feelings; it was as if she hoped by expressing them to render them imperishable, to establish an immortal record of her existence whose mortality was so sure a thing.

She did not thus analyze her need, but she was conscious that some power impelled her spiritually towards Mrs. Everett. Her hands lay quiet on the stockings, her eyes came to Mrs. Everett's face with a piercing fixed stare.

No. She couldn't tell this woman anything. Mrs. Everett believed in spiritualism. She was a mother, and she had lost her son in the war, but, gazing at her, Mrs. Jesson

no longer had that feeling of identity. The certitude of her irremediable loneliness crushed her. This woman said she communicated with her dead son. Mrs. Jesson could have laughed. Communicate with the dead! How unimportant a victory that seemed, even if true—and she believed it was only morbidity of the imagination. Mrs. Everett was all nerves. To be able to communicate with the living; for there to be no regions impenetrable to love or loneliness—that was the supreme thing, the withheld thing.

She was alone. There was no one within reach. She had a sudden despairing wonder—did Henry see?

She looked back at the stocking. That silk wasn't really a good match. Marie wouldn't think she had done it very neatly. That other pair—the mole ones—she hadn't satisfied Marie with them.

She began on the second stocking, very carefully, but without hope.

The contrast between her present state and those happy forecasts of her life here with Marie became visible to her.

“I hoped nothing would come between us. . . . If he hadn't seen Miss Baird. . . . They needn't have stopped here. I could have refused when Mr. Baird asked. If Marie had told me any one was beginning to love her, I might have thought. . . . Young men are so unstable.”

Mentally she saw Dido. She raised her eyes and stared at the black window space and the unstarred and hollow blackness beyond, and between the night and the trembling golden light of the room Dido's figure moved, heartless, strange, intrusive.

Stony immobility fell on her. She hated that girl. Realization of her own age, her dignity as wife and mother, her peculiar intimacies with pain and delight and sacrifice gave her a sense of awfulness; she sat like the victim of an impious act; she hated Dido for a triumph unmerited and unsought.

CHAPTER III

ONE PART OF THE HOUSE

I

THERE were showers in the night, and a hot, humid morning followed. A black, uprearing shape of cloud formed in the distances above the sea, and rising tilted over the dun inland fields. The North Downs were smoking with fogs, and a thick brown vapor smeared the horizons.

A metallic light burnt upon the Green; the pond was rusted; silence fell.

In the house it was very hot, very dim. There was a singular noiselessness in all the rooms. Several times Mrs. Jesson looked round with a vague sense of difference. No one was walking, they were all stealing about. They did not speak, they glanced mysteriously. Gently they shifted furniture and crockery. They appeared without having given sign of their approach. As imperceptibly they retired.

She became a little irritated. There grew in her the feeling of a deep and significant restlessness. There was something abnormal in these movements which superficially seemed no more than the daily ritual of house-duties. They disturbed her. Bessie continually passed in and out with her subdued shuffle, getting china without the chink of contact,

hovering round the gas-stove and not speaking as if the presence of death were in the house. Miss Wilson, looking with her sunken loops of brown hair and her brown dress, curiously soft and dim like a moth, flitted out of sight and into it, eyes lowered, a crimson color in her cheeks. The scullery door became a firmament into which Miss Hyde, all gleaming and hushed, broke vividly, and then disappeared like an erratic planet. Why on earth did the woman gaze so eagerly at Miss Wilson?

And outside, the sickly day hung without movement, thick, smelling of rotting leaves, of damp blackberries, of pools stagnant in ditches. No leaf stirred. The greenish and impure light rested on the ground as if the stare of the darkening sky was on it with a mortal pressure. The cows had withdrawn to the trees beyond the main road and stood there against the wet faint hedge. Two horses and their colt moved soundlessly round the pond under the silvery wild burning of the willows expanded like weak flames upon a somber east. The quietude had no end, no flaw. It was in the house, it stretched beyond the house, formless, imperative, brooding. The human stir was like the rustle of leaves, as light, as futile. Gestures of people crossing the Green were signals, incomprehensible, and of no avail.

Her head ached.

Towards the end of the morning sudden cracks of sound broke violently upon the house; Marie, who had not gone to bed till three, was now up and moving about. Doors banged. Clear "Damns" were audible.

Downstairs they started at these noises. They looked at each other. Without stirring from where they stood they

seemed to draw together, to be huddled, timid and apprehensive, in logical expectation of the storm.

They said, once or twice, that a storm was coming; they spoke composedly as if as human beings, the supreme achievements of the Creator, they knew themselves immune from all devastating forces; but the tiny whites of their eyes moved nervously towards the window, towards the humped hills, shaggy with fog.

II

Marie went out before lunch and did not return for the meal. Mrs. Jesson waited some time, and then in a loud voice told Miss Wilson to bring in the soup. She sat down at the head of the table with Bessie on her left. She ate little, but she watched over Bessie's needs with a stern and unsmiling care.

Miss Hammond's voice weakened with every response to inquiry. She obviously tried to make no noise with her knife and fork; she kept her eyes lowered, but several times they moved under their lids in Mrs. Jesson's direction.

Coffee was taken in the same silence and stillness; both women had a listening air.

Then Mrs. Jesson put down her empty cup. She stood up.

"I hope Marie comes back before the storm breaks," she said.

Her tone was loud and harsh, and Miss Hammond's fat body jerked. She had been drinking enjoyably, but she lowered her cup at once, subduing her look of pleasure.

"I hope so. I dare say she will. I shouldn't worry if I were you."

Mrs. Jesson didn't answer. She gazed at Bessie. Not worry! As if that were possible. Why did people say such senseless things?

She turned and went out of the room.

In the dark passage she paused again. She did not know why, save for a dim notion that there was something she ought to do or say, that something was being asked of her, and she had a moment of listening.

In it her brain grew blank. She presently gazed round her with a look of wonder, perplexed by her stationary position there.

She crossed the hall and went up the staircase.

When she reached the landing she again stopped, her eyes on Dido's door.

There was no definite thought in her head, but her hands began to stir and her mouth to twist and protrude. She felt ferocious, impatient; there were cries in her heart, struggles, destructive actions.

Her sense of having assailed something with voice and hand was so strong that she stared, dully surprised to see the passage free from wreckage, orderly and unchanged. She went on at once and into her bedroom.

Her head throbbed violently. She lay down on the bed and closed her eyes. Her face screwed up into an expression of deep pain. Through her eyelids she saw Marie's face and beautiful body. She felt that she had no hold on that body; she lay under Marie's steady, bright gaze as under an iron weight.

A long time passed. She had dozed lightly, with a distressing consciousness of a skirt Marie had given her to alter, of Bessie's afternoon cup of tea, of open windows which ought to be closed before the storm broke. The universe began and ended with the house. Beyond there was nothingness, at the heart of which brooded an inscrutable purpose.

She was aroused by a burst of sound immediately at her ear. She sprang into a sitting position with a wild look, with her mouth open though she emitted no sound. She saw Marie standing against the closed door.

The darkness of semi-unconsciousness cleared from her eyes. She trembled very much.

"Marie, you did frighten me. I think you might be quieter." She sat upright, physically intimidating.

Marie did not look at her. Standing before the mirror Marie regarded herself with a black intentness.

"I didn't know you were in here." She turned and walked to the long wardrobe mirror and gazed into it.

She had on a pale-lemon dress and a large hat. Her back, given now to Mrs. Jesson, looked young and pliant, but her legs were a little thick.

With the imperious decision which had marked all her movements since she entered, she now faced her mother. Her cheeks were fat and dark in the shadow cast by her hat, her lips scarcely showed; the pouches under her eyes were pale, they made her face appear dull and weary.

She burst out laughing and tossed a pair of gloves on to the dressing-table.

"Well, I thought I knew women," she exclaimed, gazing in front of her, "and their predatory powers—I've seen a good many hunts, but I don't think I've ever witnessed a cruder one than this. It's too lovely! Miss Baird's opinion of our obtuseness must be extraordinary. Or does she despise opinion? I thought that women generally camouflaged their intentions a little, anyhow. This is really too good."

Still laughing, she pulled out her hatpins and slapped the hat down on top of the gloves.

Mrs. Jesson looked at her, but did not speak. She was still trembling and she moistened her lips. She must be ready; something was coming. She had a dim sense of crisis.

Marie seated herself at the dressing-table and took down her hair, dragging it, throwing the hairpins down, not quickly, but with a kind of deliberate ferocity. Looking straight at her masterful reflection she went on:

"I met Mrs. Randall and went back with her to lunch. I come home and meet Hobbie," she burst into loud laughter—"poor devil! I wish May had been with me to see him. After this, I abandon my sex. Oh!" She waved her hands with a spacious gesture. "I've always been a feminist, but after this piece of *blatant* man-hunting—any man can damn women in my presence and I'll applaud him." She clasped her hands under her chin, and, throwing back her head, laughed with still greater noise, her eyes a fierce glint amid a damp tangle of hair. She had a wild and rough appearance like that of an animal.

“What was he doing, Marie?” Mrs. Jesson asked, speaking huskily. She lowered her legs to the floor. She felt the perfection, the singularity, of her possession of this woman. None shared it. Her privileges, her powers, her duties, were unique. Marie suffered. She, alone, could grasp Marie, defend, solace, eternally labor for her.

“Doing!” Marie brought her linked hands down on the dressing-table with a loud thump. “Poor wretch. He was submitting. It was pathetic. Miss Baird was displaying her most *innocent* and virginal airs, Miss Wilson was gazing as she does gaze, *enthralled*—a romance of real life—and Miss Nicholls looked *too* prim and blushing for words. How is it that these awfully good and Mid-Victorian people always see the sensuous part of anything when an ungodly demoralized person like myself does not? Very funny. It was a delightful scene. I must write and tell May. Poor Hobbie! She’ll mourn over him! And such fearfully crude tactics. Oh, it’s a tragedy. It is; it is. I could weep for him.”

She became silent; her hair had rolled over her shoulders and down her cheeks, only her nose and her prominent brow were visible, her head was sunken on her chest; she looked abandoned.

Mrs. Jesson’s throat was dry, her red nostrils were distended, her face, reddened by heat and slumber, and lined with emotion, stood out of the haggard and evil daylight with the greatness, the terribleness, of one mastered by a passion, made by it tyrannical, conducted by it to sacrifice, to evil, to heroism, to despair. She got off the bed.

“Marie,” she began, remaining on the rug by the bed.

Marie turned, without a smile, without expression of any kind. Gazing at that heavy and lifeless face, Mrs. Jesson did not for the moment go on. She moved her eyes away to the window.

In the room it was very dark. Outside the light was on the fields, creeping there lividly. People had come to their gates; she could see them staring at the running clouds which stormed up from the south; she listened to the light drift of their voices.

She did not understand why, but the sight of those meager narrow bodies inspired her. They extended for ever, those groups of human figures, so inexpressive of the immense dramas they by their contacts created. Mothers and children. She felt omnipotent, supreme, sublimely gifted. Marie, having a mother, had everything.

She moved off the rug. “Marie darling, did you care for him very much?”

Marie threw her hair back from her face. “I don’t understand you. Care? For him? What in the world are you talking about?” Her brows were crooked with displeased amazement.

Mrs. Jesson’s eyes shone compassionately on her. “I know you don’t like to admit it, Marie; you’re so proud, but I’m your mother. Anything you say is safe with me. Don’t keep me outside your trouble. I’ve—suffered so—knowing how you must be suffering. Darling . . .”

Marie sprang up and beyond the reach of her mother’s advancing hands. “Suffering!” she cried. “Who on earth

spoke of suffering? You really are a fool, mother." She laughed angrily. "I'm sorry to have to be so rude, but there's no other word for you."

Mrs. Jesson laid a shaking hand on the back of the chair Marie had left. "No, Marie, a mother. I'm a mother. Perhaps a mother's love is folly. . . . Don't put me off like this. I want to help you. . . ."

"But I don't *want* help. You're mad; you're mad. *Be* a mother, my dear good woman," she laughed. "But be intelligent as well, I implore you.

"Marie, if you knew how you hurt me, you wouldn't speak to me like this."

Marie made a movement of uncontrollable irritation. "Well, you're so exasperating. I wish you wouldn't try and interpret me. You're never right. I know you love me—and I love you—but you know I hate talking sloppily. The best way of showing love in my opinion isn't to be continually tormenting a person with professions of worship, and estimates of character which are invariably wrong, but to try and understand them and give them what they want, not what you want."

Marie looked at her fingers, speaking to them fluently, forcibly. "Your idea of love is a perpetual exchange of kisses and hugs and endless confidences—what you feel when you say good-by and what I feel when you aren't with me, and you call that helping me and sacrificing yourself. I don't see it. I call it a form of self-gratification. You do it because it pleases you. You give up things for me and worry over me merely because you wouldn't be happy if you didn't. I don't see any virtue in it. What

I want and what I should be grateful for is to be left alone, and that's what you won't do—merely because it would hurt you to do it. But that would be what I should call real sacrifice and love. Doing something that's painful, not what's pleasant."

There was no movement, no word, from Mrs. Jesson. She stood frozenly staring at Marie. She held on to the chair as if that alone kept her upright. Her lips parted in the stress of her pain. She moved her eyes from Marie and incredulously looked round the room. Not shattered—unchanged. She, too, survived. Yet this was what Marie thought of her. Marie. And she had been about to clasp Marie, holding her for ever.

She cleared her throat. "Marie dear . . ."

Marie let her hands fall to her side. She looked at her mother.

"There, don't grizzle," she said; "I know you mean well, bless you. Only do understand that you're not to jump to conclusions."

She moved firmly to the window and closed it. "There'll be a deluge in a minute."

Quickly Mrs. Jesson went to her. "You don't know how you pain me, Marie. Sometimes I think you don't care. . . . But that don't matter. I don't want to talk about myself. I want to know how you feel—whether you love this man. If you'd told me before that he was thinking about you I could have acted differently. You never tell me anything. I know you're modern and I'm old-fashioned. I can't get used to there not being perfect confidence between mother and child. It seems dreadful to me. I will try and

look at things with your eyes; I do. But I can't bear—to—think—that you're suffering, and I . . .”

“Oh, *mother*, do you want to drive me frantic? You really are perfectly maddening.”

Marie began to walk backwards and forwards, her face crimson, her features swollen with passion. “You say the most idiotic things and make me swear at you, and then you begin on my brutality. For—heaven's sake—leave—me—alone. Do you imagine I'm breaking my heart because one of your virtuous bourgeois women has roped in Hob? I don't care a damn what Miss Baird may do.” She laughed shrilly.

“But he wanted you, Marie; you expected him to . . .”

“Good Lord, a hundred men have wanted me! Is it my destitution you're mourning over? I should imagine it's Miss Baird for whom Hob is the one and only. Not me. Her condition is positively pathetic. How frightful if after such strenuous endeavors she hadn't netted him! May will shout. And now, not another word. And listen, mother: you—are—not to show Hob your interest in him. Your manner has been perfectly awful all the time. Tell you things! It isn't safe to. You never by any chance act sanely.”

She picked up the comb and began to drag it through her hair.

Thunder muttered. Faint and small, voices ran with it. Silence. The clouds muttered again, cracked, and grew silent on a moan.

She wasn't precious to Marie, nor essential. In Marie's life she was nothing but an irritation, a cloud, a superfluity.

She stood dumb and sightless with pain. The room was a featureless void to her, but she had mental visions which filled her with despair. She saw Marie receding from her; inexorably Marie was placing great spaces between them; spiritually she was melting beyond sight, beyond reach of appeal.

She was born in this room. Her cradle had stood in it—not long ago—a little while ago.

She was born of this body. She was thrusting her mother away, escaping.

With a loud cry Mrs. Jesson turned upon Marie. “Marie darling, don’t be like this to me. Why won’t you tell me the truth? Did he really love you or were you mistaken? If he hadn’t seen Miss Baird . . .”

Marie leapt out of her arms. At the same moment the door opened and Miss Hammond came in.

The mother and daughter turned, Marie still savage, Mrs. Jesson’s face still twisted in desperate appeal.

Miss Hammond opened her mouth, but a crash of thunder made her soundless; she stood, clutching the door-handle, glaring palely, voicing syllables without effect. The thunder thudded along the sky like the withdrawing moan of surges along a high shore. It lapsed in a sigh whose expiration was like a death. In the sky there developed a boiling and furious sound.

Miss Hammond spoke. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know Marie was here. I only came to say that it’s tea-time and Miss Wilson is talking to Miss Baird on the verandah. I think she must have forgotten the time. I didn’t like to call her. Shall I put on the kettle? So sorry to interrupt.”

Her eyes went from one to the other; then she looked round the room, she slightly advanced her head and shoulders and glanced round the door. Her eyes came back to the mother and daughter.

“Of course put the kettle on,” Marie exclaimed. “Will you never understand that you needn’t ask permission for everything you do? This thunder’s given me a rabid head. Perfectly putrid household. Oh, don’t look so scared, Bessie. I’ll see to the tea. I know I shall get it if I do it myself. I suppose Miss Wilson is congratulating Miss Baird. Now don’t either of you get doing anything. I’ll set the table. Only, for the Lord’s sake, leave me alone.”

With her hair still hanging loose she walked past Miss Hammond and down the passage.

Mrs. Jesson almost ran towards the door. “Marie!”

Marie was going; the scene was closed; they mightn’t be alone again together for hours. If she let Marie escape now she lost her for ever. She uttered a sobbing cry. She couldn’t endure this—the most important thing of Marie’s life—love, marriage—and she was cast out from it, impotent, disdained.

“Marie!” she cried. “Marie—darling—wait just a minute.”

Seeing Bessie’s figure in the doorway, she thrust out her big arm and hurried on blindly. Bessie turned, flattened herself against the door, her eyes immense and stark with fright.

“Marie, don’t leave me like this. You oughtn’t to treat me like this.”

She went down the passage, down the stairs, tears rolling

on to her parted lips. She heard a little squeak from Bessie. "I'm coming. Don't go. Do wait for me."

The words, the tone, had no meaning for Mrs. Jesson. She was made quite wild by a sense of tragedy. She did not dare to think, to be calm. Terrible insights, devastating certitudes, were round the fringes of her mind, muttering and thronging. She fled from them. They weren't true, they weren't true. Marie wasn't cruel, selfish, reckless. She loved Hob; she was made like this by suffering. If Bessie hadn't come in just then she would have been in her mother's arms—a little girl again—Mrs. Jesson's baby. Oh, the thunder!

Hurrying across the hall, she made no sound herself as it crashed over the house, but a faint shriek came from Bessie, ceasing as if throttled by the running uproar. The hall was black; a ghostly and narrow smear of gray, the window lay on one side of it like a discolored wound. The place smelt of fog, of earth, of nooks of rotted vegetation.

She called loudly, "Marie!"

She had a furious resentful feeling that Bessie was pattering after her. On this sacred scene no one ought to intrude.

She swept, crying, passionate, shaking violently, into the kitchen.

"Marie, we can't leave it like this. It's too much for me. Do try and understand what I feel, darling. . . ."

She stopped. After a moment she said in a hoarse voice, "I want to be—what pleases you, Marie."

She was not crying now. Marie's face had produced in her a perfect immobility. She looked at Marie. The light

in the room was a misshapen, moribund thing, unsteadily floating with a corpse-like hue on the prevailing darkness. It touched her face. Marie was in gloom.

“You’re hysterical,” Marie said, not angrily, but with a contemptuous kindness. “I *thought* I heard you bawling after me.” She turned and looked at the kettle. “You shall have a cup of tea in a tick. Go into the drawing-room and lie down. I’ll bring you your tea. I can’t imagine what you’re making all this fuss about. Melodramatic person. I understand what you feel—all your sentiment. I know it. It’s prehistoric, but that’s of no account to you. If I’ve hurt you, I’m sorry. Why you should be hurt because I’m honest with you is a mystery to me. You’re the best woman in the world; that’s why you’re so difficult to live with. Now May, who, I suppose, isn’t fit for respectable society at all, is the easiest person for a life-partner. Go along to the couch. Where’s the tea? *Fly* now, I hate to be mounted guard over when I’m doing anything. Is that Bessie prowling behind you? Good Lord, you’re all daft together. *Go* away, Bessie. You—shall—have—your—tea—directly. Only *go*. Both of you. Oh, damn this lid!”

Mrs. Jesson went out. She walked past Bessie with an intent and vacant look. She entered the drawing-room.

III

She walked into the middle of the room and then stopped. She fumbled in her skirt and, finding her pocket, pulled up a wisp of scented handkerchief and rubbed it over her face.

She suddenly noticed that she felt rather sick; her knees were trembling.

Stiffly, carefully, as over a rocking floor, she went to the chesterfield. She sat down, her legs wide apart, her damp hands trembling on her knees.

She had a desolate and affrighted look. She was not thinking; she was conscious only of an immense bereavement. She had nothing. This was not a thought; it was a state of being. Impoverished, alone, unregarded and undesired: she was all these things.

She heard Marie moving about. Marie was not hers.

She lifted both hands to her cheeks. "She don't mean it; it's because she's unhappy. It's her way of talking. It isn't that she's hard. I shall be ill if I worry so."

She looked darkly around. The things in the room looked back at her with a dull and ironic stare. The tragedy of her solitude in this room lay bald and stark before her. She realized it. Tears ran down her cheeks again, and she pressed her puffy fingers on her eyelids till her lashes were glued to her cheeks.

"I can't bear scenes with her. I shall never be anything to her . . . no restraint. . . . I've lost her. . . . I'm afraid . . . what'll she do. . . . The time I've been thinking of so . . . marrying her . . . making her safe . . . and she throws me off."

She heard Marie's step in the hall. Instantly she rubbed the handkerchief over her face. When Marie came in with the tray she turned round; she smiled.

CHAPTER IV
ANOTHER PART OF THE HOUSE

I

Dido had met Hob on the Green. She knew he was there hoping he might meet her, reluctant to come to the house because of Marie. He went with her to the Stores and then walked back with her.

She was very happy.

But as they approached St. Hubert's they saw Maria, Hilda, and Miss Wilson, the former leaving the house, the latter about to enter it.

Marie waved her hand and piercingly gazed at them all. She smiled, made some allusion to the sky, and walked away, nonchalant, happy.

Dido did not look after her. Marie—she could be disregarded; it was Hilda who so tenderly must be observed. Now, with Hob by Dido's side, discovered enjoyably bending over Dido, taking occasionally, for pure happiness, spontaneously dancing steps, Hilda must know. She did know. Dido discerned knowledge in her steady, clear stare.

With a feeling of guilt and yet resenting that feeling as causeless, Dido refrained from further scrutiny of her cousin. She moved her eyes to Miss Wilson, who, her hand on the door, candidly exhibited to them all a soft, foolish delight and sympathy.

Involuntarily Dido smiled. Then she was annoyed. Miss

Wilson would think she was drawing attention to her escorted state, whereas it was merely amused perception of their mutual romance which had drawn that acknowledgment from her. We were all so absurdly sentimental. It was only necessary for some one to utter "All the world loves a lover" and the last fatuous touch would be given to the scene.

But there was something feminine and youthful and—and *familiar* about this woman; a delicate agitation; a light, a warmth, as if one gazed at oneself in a mirror.

Dido felt as if something had leapt at her blindingly, some fact. Hob was no longer talking. The surface of her mind grasped this and she turned, again remembering Hilda; she said good-by to him, and went in with Hilda. Miss Wilson was in front of them, going towards the kitchen.

Silently Dido and Hilda ascended the stairs.

From below a high voice called, "Is that you, Miss Baird?"

"Yes, Miss Hyde. We shall be down in five minutes."

"It's all ready." Miss Hyde's rapid sentences bubbled like water out of hearing.

The girls went into their bedroom.

Hilda took off her hat, giving her pure, cold profile to Dido.

"How frightfully hot it is!" Dido exclaimed. "We shall have a storm."

In her nervousness she spoke very quickly.

Hilda turned to her. "What say?"

Blank, white, uncomprehending—oh, Hilda, what really do you feel? These horrible dissimulations, and barriers,

and repulses. How quickly one was out of touch; how far Hilda had receded!

Dido repeated her words.

"Yes, I think we shall," Hilda calmly answered. She sat down on the edge of the bed and began to take off her shoes.

Dido, standing large and alert, subtly appealing, in the center of the room, spoke in a distinct, too animated, voice.

"Do you know, I'm in possession of Miss Hammond's history at last. It's frightfully exciting. Mr. Ramsay told it me this morning." Her childish cheeks crimsoned. She had a pause, looking soft, shy, excited, but as if she were not very far from tears.

Hilda presented to her faintly surprised and unsympathetic eyes, lips glued together, the brow of a Madonna.

Dido continued, rather breathlessly, "Miss Jesson told it him directly she knew Mrs. Jesson was bringing Miss Hammond over. Miss Hammond *is* mental. Her father died some years ago, quite mad. And Miss Hammond nursed him. He wasn't dangerous, so they didn't put him away. And Miss Hammond had a breakdown after it—it must have been frightful, mustn't it?—and she used to go out on the common—they lived at Streatham—with her hair down and wander about, and a clergyman found her once and brought her home. And—it was most unfortunate—all this happened at the time when the raids were on. You remember bombs were dropped at Streatham?"

She had been speaking with her gaze lowered, but now she darted a glance at Hilda. Did Hilda look faintly interested, troubled, hostile, sad? Hilda's gaze was inscrutable.

"Yes," Hilda said in a very high key, her brows lifting too, so that she seemed in the act of soaring away.

"Well, one fell near her house and terrified her. She then developed the delusion that some one was instigating the Germans to kill her. Poor thing. She kept moving all over England wherever she could get rooms—in a dreadful state of panic—and at the end of the war, directly it was possible, she went to America to her cousins out there, thinking, you know, that she would evade her enemy. And as nothing has happened to her since, she imagines that her cousins and every one—it's a universal conspiracy, I think—have united to save her from this enemy. That's why she thanks us all. On everything else she's quite sane. But she still thinks her enemy is looking for her, and they have to be awfully careful to keep up the fiction that she's quite safe and they're quite safe or she'll imagine she's being tracked and they know it. I should never have thought of such a solution of her mystery. . . . Are you ready?"

"Quite."

They looked at each other. Then Hilda walked to the door. "Poor old thing. Oh, the window. Will you close it? There's sure to be a lot of rain and it will beat in so."

She went out, gazing straight ahead, walking with authority, somehow unanswerable, enigmatical.

Dido closed the window. Everything was spoilt. She was no longer happy. She wanted to think of Hob, recalling his words and glances, delicately divining the future, smiling to herself, mysterious and tender, and she was forced to think of Hilda.

“Does she care for him or is it only vanity?” she thought.

It seemed to her that she did not know Hilda at all. A feeling of impotence irritated her. She could see every detail of Hilda’s face and figure, she remembered that only the staircase lay between them, and yet she had a sense of Hilda as being inaccessible, mistress of herself, unresponsive to pressure.

“For two years we’ve lived with each other,” she mused, going out of the room, “and yet directly I’m ruffled I feel miles away from every one, and directly Hilda’s ruffled there’s gulfs between us. I can’t imagine Hilda violently in love—but she’s sentimental—in a way—oh, I don’t know her. It’s wretched. I can’t be happy while we’re estranged. And yet I am happy—somewhere in me I am—and it’s being happy while Hilda’s miserable that makes me unhappy. Perfectly poisonous, as he’d say.”

She laughed, and then uneasily looked round her, impressed by some inimical quality in the silence and moody shadowiness of the house. She felt as if by laughing she was guilty of sacrilege, heartlessness, stupidity.

“It was my fault at the beginning, insinuating that I thought he admired her. He was merely natural and friendly with her; he is still; he was just the same to her this morning; he likes her; dear Hilda; he sees how good she is. And he was stiff with me while he found out whether he really was falling in love with me. He hasn’t altered to Hilda at all; only to me.”

She darted round the hall a radiant little glance. Sullen, airless, it stared at her, unmeaning shapes receiving her bright look.

She became again obscurely uneasy.

She went into the dining-room.

II

Lunch was a constrained and chilling meal. Hilda was not silent; she talked, perhaps, a little more than usual, but she was affirmative rather than suggestive. Outwardly, at least, she seemed confident and unvexed. Her eyes expressed a cold pity for any one who could not see the reason and correctness of her own attitudes.

Miss Hyde, who, in her position as "companion," had meals with them, was profoundly gloomy. Whenever the cousins were not speaking she began at once in a grumbling little voice, jerking her head, resentfully and hopelessly staring round, jabbing the air and her food with her fork, putting both knife and fork down suddenly to press dramatically some part of her body.

"Oh, I do feel bad to-day," she said. "I don't know what's the matter with me. I hope I'm not going to be bad. I feel as if I am. Funny. That's what I feel. I expect I'm going to get something. It's the thunder; that's what it is. Upset me. I do feel bad. I think I've a pain at my heart." She dropped knife and fork. "There! When I turn like that—I had it then. A pain. A kind of—oh, I don't know how to describe it. Most unpleasant. It's the thunder; that's what it is. Upset me. I do hope I'm not going to have an attack. So awkward for you."

"Lie down this afternoon," Dido said. "We can get tea ourselves."

"That's very kind of you, but you're always kind. That's why I like to keep well. It worries me to feel I'm giving you trouble. If I lay down I couldn't sleep—not if there's thunder. I haven't slept at all well lately. It's that that's upset me—that and the weather. Last night I lay till three—no, four—and I counted sheep jumping over a fence, and up to a hundred. I couldn't sleep. And then just as I was dropping off Miss Jesson came up and that woke me. I don't like to say anything, but I like people to be thoughtful. Miss Jesson's very nice, very nice indeed—but she forgets there are other people in the house. And Miss Wilson kept turning over in bed. I could hear the bed creak. She couldn't sleep. Oh, well, perhaps it was pleasant thoughts kept her awake, but I wanted to go to sleep. I do my thinking in the day. If I could have had my salts this morning I should have been better, but I had them yesterday, and I don't like to take them too often. It's lowering; lowers the tone of the body. . . . There! There's that pain again. When I turned. I wonder what it is. I shall go to the doctor if it keeps on. I don't believe in neglecting yourself. It might be something dangerous. I do hope it isn't. I've never had it before. I do hope I'm not going to be bad."

"I expect it's indigestion," Hilda said.

Momentarily checked, Miss Hyde looked at Hilda. Then she moved her eyes away.

"Yes. Perhaps it is." She became quite still and silent, staring at a salt-cellar.

Positively Hilda had the effect of a piece of ice inserting

itself between objects and sending them far off from each other. Dido made an effort to capture Miss Hyde and, as it were, re-establish her in communion.

"You're tired, Miss Hyde. If you don't lie down I shall write and tell mother you're guilty of insubordination. I'll bring you a book. And I'll see to the tea. We shan't go out. I want to get Southey's *Commonplace* book and see how many of the quotations I can place. You read, you know, keeping your hand over the authority."

She laughed, glancing from Miss Hyde to Hilda.

"I should think you must want something to do," Hilda said, with a wide, unsympathetic look.

Dido laughed again, forcing out nervous jerks. She stared at the tablecloth, miserable and dismayed.

Miss Hyde looked at her—a dim, regretful look. Then she gazed ahead, moving her head as in acquiescence, settling her mobile lips. No one spoke.

Dido was appalled to find that she wanted to cry. She never cried. But it was horrible so constantly to be thrust back into loneliness, having such imperfect vision, understanding so little, encountering everywhere barriers, veils, gulfs.

Poor Hilda. And Miss Hyde was miserable; Marie was savage with chagrin; the ostentatious lightness of her walk as she retreated this morning had betrayed that; Mrs. Jesson last night looked tragically brooding; nowhere was there tranquillity, harmony, joy. People couldn't live at peace with each other; didn't really live with each other at all. They lived alone. And, perpetually striving for alliance

with strangers, they blundered, hurt, fought, always clashing but never allied.

Wretched, wretched.

III

After lunch they sat on the verandah reading or watching the development of the storm. They did not speak. They sedulously avoided looking at each other.

Gradually Dido ceased to gaze at Robert Southey. She fixed her eyes on the intense and savage sky; she listened to the voices which outside the cottages at the end of the garden, rose weakly, inflected with a consciousness of wonder, ignorance, and expectation. She could just see above the hedge small white ovals of face upturned like her own. Darkness was sliding over the verandah, the light on the garden withered. There was a shudder of wind in the trees.

The drawing-room door opened and she heard footsteps. Both she and Hilda looked round.

Miss Wilson stood irresolute in the middle of the room. "I'm sorry," she said, making a nervous clutch at the dangling locket. "I didn't know any one was out there. I know Miss Jesson's out and Mrs. Jesson's lying down. I thought perhaps I'd better shut the window. I don't think it will be long before the storm breaks."

She came to the beginning of the verandah. Timidly, yet with a smile, she looked at them. Her face grew flushed.

"Oh, good gracious," Dido thought, with a sense of tragic-comedy, "here's some one else seeking a confidant and a support."

Well, anything was better than solitude with Hilda. Miss Wilson so obviously bore a magnificent burden. Let her relieve herself of it by speech.

Dido smiled merrily at her. "We shan't come in until we're driven," she said. "Are you afraid of storms?"

"No, not very." Miss Wilson moved a little farther on to the verandah; she rested her palms on a table behind her, half sitting on the table. Meeting Dido's gaze, she laughed suddenly and shortly, afterwards looking down and working her lips.

Hilda stared at her, surprised, but more passive and bland than she had been for the last few hours.

Miss Wilson glanced up again; she began to rub her palms on the edge of the table. "Sometimes they give me a headache, but to-day I haven't one. I think—how you feel in your spirits—makes a difference. If you've any worry—or disappointment—the darkness seems to make it worse. At least, I've always found it does. But when you're happy—you—you," she rubbed feverishly, she laughed, bending her head, "you make your own sunshine, I suppose."

Furtively but with a subdued gleam her brown eyes moved round to them under her lids.

"I suppose you do." Dido laughed. There was a high, amazed, but amiable little sound from Hilda.

Miss Wilson looked at both girls with liking, with gratitude.

"I mustn't stop here interrupting you in your reading," she said, feigning to move from the table.

"We aren't reading," Dido said. "Please stop, if you've

nothing else to do. It must be so fearfully boring by yourself. I know Miss Hyde is lying down."

Miss Wilson did not seem to be interested in Miss Hyde. She did not answer this statement. "It's very kind of you," she said. "I do get rather dull sometimes. People don't always understand that you like to talk sometimes. Of course I know I'm only the housekeeper, but if you happen to be poorer than other people, and have to work for your living, it doesn't mean you don't feel things. I'm not used to housework; not really; I mean I wasn't brought up to it. I've been a school-teacher all my life. I'm not saying that every one here hasn't treated me well. Mrs. Jesson has always been most kind—and thoughtful. She treats me as if I were the same as herself. And Miss Jesson is very nice. Only I feel . . . But I oughtn't to say anything. Things get round so. I know you wouldn't repeat anything I told you but . . ."

She paused, mysterious, agitated, half laughing, her glance speeding about with an air unquiet and yet delighted.

Dido became a little alarmed. She was curious and she was sympathetic, but she could not forget that Miss Wilson belonged to "that class of people," while Marie, however inwardly coarse she might be, was superficially . . . Dido's thoughts broke off. She hated herself for these distinctions.

"But I can't listen to criticisms of Marie"—she resumed her quick reflections. "Miss Wilson's confidence in my loyalty to her is very touching, but I think she ought to spare me. She thinks so herself, but she's dying to go on."

Gently Dido lowered her eyes, suggesting agreement with Miss Wilson's reticence.

Miss Wilson, however, went on. "One can't help noticing things. I know people notice and it's natural they should be jealous—and—and anxious. It's natural. So long as you're—well, poor—or—or unfortunate—you have plenty of friends, but directly you—directly anything"—she swallowed, and then drew a long breath; the frill round her collar flapped as she moved her head, she gripped the tables as if this alone helped her to retain the last vestiges of her self-control—"any happiness comes to one, you're talked about—and disliked. It's jealousy. I quite understand it. I don't expect anything different."

What in the world did she mean? Dido and Hilda stared at her. They became infected by her emotion. When lightning gleamed bluey-yellow across the dun verandah and thunder, distant and restrained before, crashed out above their heads, they both sprang up with a cry.

"It's begun," Miss Wilson said placidly. "Come inside. It's not safe there."

"How we squealed!" Dido exclaimed, picking up her book.

They all entered the drawing-room. Hilda and Miss Wilson paused there, facing each other, but Dido, after a glance at them both, continued to move towards the door. Her progress had almost the look of a flight. And she felt that she was flying. She felt that any moment Miss Wilson would rend their ignorance to shreds and reveal herself, fully, startingly. Dido dreaded that revelation. With instinctive prudence or selfishness she tried to escape it. She had ob-

scurely the feeling that if she knew Miss Wilson she would, in some mysterious way, be responsible for her. Something would be demanded: guardianship, support, guidance.

Dido opened the door. She knew that Hilda was close behind her, that Miss Wilson was following.

She crossed the hall. "We shall have a glorious view of it from the porch, Hilda," she exclaimed.

"I suppose it's safe?" Hilda observed.

"Doesn't it look grand?" Miss Wilson murmured.

They were all in the porch, huddled together in a corner, gazing through the outer door at the storm. For a moment they were silent; Dido felt Hilda's warm body pressing her on one side and Miss Wilson's on the other. She felt soberly but not unhappily that she was a captive; she couldn't escape Miss Wilson; she no longer desired to.

The sky was a sweeping black foam; it simmered audibly. As they gazed, there dashed from it white hail which rattled on the roof, on the tiled path, on the windows. Struck by the huge, luridly shining hailstones, the three horses galloped off the Green. Crashes of thunder and dancing twists of lightning, the bubble of streaming channels, the softly ferocious hiss of the gray rain, the extinction of all contours—these distracted Dido from her companions.

Miss Wilson's voice rose, weak and urgent, at her shoulder.

"I found out long ago that it didn't do to expect too much of people. You're always disappointed if you do. I've been mistaken in so many people—thinking they were better than they were, you know. I can quite understand—knowing what people are—that Miss Jesson doesn't like me.

I don't mean to say she isn't always quite nice, but I know that all the time—she's thinking—well—perhaps I oughtn't to say it—feeling I mean—it sounds conceited I know, but it's the truth—I don't see why I should pretend I don't notice it—I know she's feeling that I've robbed her." She laughed hysterically. "I daresay if he hadn't seen me he might have liked her. I'm sure if she's upset I'm sorry. But I don't feel I've—that I've anything to reproach myself with. It isn't as if I—I put myself out to—to—well, attract him. He showed the very first time that——"

She sought for words, but she could no longer go on. She was trembling violently. Again she laughed.

Dido and Hilda stood motionless, staring at the water rushing with a yellow gleam down the road.

"I don't say I should have expected him to look at me," Miss Wilson gaspingly resumed, "but it shows men don't think about dress but—but the woman. I could tell at once that—he was coming after me. I know you've all noticed it. I shouldn't have said anything now—only—you—you looked so friendly—not as if you remembered my position here. I don't think people always realize how—how much good their sympathy does—and I did feel it would do me good just to speak about it to—to some one who wouldn't feel—well, that I was robbing them. Miss Hyde has been very friendly up to now, but she's jealous now. I know she is. And I knew you wouldn't be." She looked at Dido with a soft significance, her eyes quickly dropping again. "You're happy yourself. I feel you understand. I——"

She stopped. The thud of feet on the staircase brought

their eyes to the door which shut them off from the hall. They saw Marie pass to the kitchen; they glimpsed her determined face overhung by floating hair. She had not seen them.

Involuntarily they rocked towards each other as a root of lightning stamped the sky, and the porch flared up. The thunder broke on them with a sound like the fall of ruined cities in some other and disregarded world. Battered and amazed by it they stared, scarcely intelligently, at Mrs. Jesson running downstairs, pursued by Miss Hammond, whose eyes, standing out of her head, rolled blindly and mournfully.

Then again the hall was empty. They looked at each other. Miss Wilson seemed impenetrable to the suggestions of the house. She had forgotten tea. Mistily she smiled, she began to laugh. She looked down, rosy and trembling in the ecstasy of her thoughts.

Dido tried to speak, but when she sought for words her heart-beat quickened; the necessity of answering Miss Wilson appalled her.

They stood, quite silent and musing, for a few moments. Then Miss Wilson exclaimed:

“They must have come down for tea. I’d quite forgotten.”

Laughing emotionally, she regarded them. She seemed to find their uneasy and serious smiles adequate answer. “I dare say I’ve been boring you with my chatter,” she said, “but I do feel that it’s done me good. Good-by.”

She slipped, vibrating wildly, into the hall.

“Oh, good heavens!” Dido exclaimed.

She gazed at Hilda, and Hilda, intimately, cloudlessly, returned her look.

With a throb of joy she perceived this. She beamed on Hilda, as if to accelerate Hilda's progress back to her. "Jimmy Ainger," she whispered. "She must mean him."

"I never heard of anything so extraordinary," Hilda ejaculated. "She must be a very silly woman, I should imagine."

"Yes. But I don't feel able to laugh. It's a tragedy for her. What a monstrous delusion! When she's undeceived!"

In the midst of her eloquent gestures she was arrested by the sudden immobility of Hilda's eyes, the dull color coming into Hilda's face.

With an inward gasp she discerned the parallelism between Hilda's position and Miss Wilson's. Both had, unjustifiably, imagined themselves admired.

But there was no similarity between the two cases! Miss Wilson's was a colossal madness; Hilda's a pardonable mistake.

But Hilda thought Dido mentally classed them together. She was wounded, angered, and filled with shame.

How could Hilda misunderstand Dido so?

Appealingly Dido looked at her.

Hilda turned away. "Isn't it time we saw about our tea?" she said, and went into the hall.

With a gesture of irritation as if she flung off all the shadows the house was massing around her, Dido followed.

CHAPTER V

NIGHT IN THE HOUSE

I

THEY met Marie, who was taking into the drawing-room a tray of tea-things. She smiled with closed lips and unfathomable, keen eyes. Behind her came Miss Hammond.

One large yellow hand lay clenched on Miss Hammond's bosom. She was walking near the wall, brushing it with her shoulder, moving her feet slowly and with deliberate quietness. Over Hilda's dark and delicate head she looked at Dido.

Dido smiled.

Pressing against the wall, the back of her head touching it, her white stare on Dido, she said breathlessly: "Such trouble. I wonder why. All the kind people there are about. Do you know why we're troubled?"

There was no emotion in her voice, no expression, except watchfulness, in her gaze.

Dido said: "No. I dare say it's the storm. There's nothing to be troubled about, I'm sure."

"How nice," Miss Hammond answered without enthusiasm, without a smile. "Perhaps we shan't be soon—if it's only the storm. So nice not to be worried about anything."

She continued to advance towards the drawing-room.

Dido went into the kitchen. Miss Hyde was there, talking to Hilda.

"I got up," she cried. "I feel ever so much better. I am so glad. The pain's quite gone. I don't want that. I was frightened. I am glad it's gone. I hope it won't come again. Nasty old thing! I've quite enough with my head and my neuritis and my chilblains without having my heart bad. I'm sure! I am glad it's gone. I feel so much brighter. That was you letting me lie down. Kind and thoughtful. I always said you were. Jolly."

Pensively Dido listened. She was set now in the very heart of the house. Luminous and simple it lay around her. There was now no distance between her and the figures in it. These figures were no longer mysterious. She knew them.

Without speaking she helped Hilda set the tray. Unhesitatingly she brought the silver teapot, the milk jug, the sugar basin; she opened the case of spoons, she swung the silver cake-basket, and all the time she gazed at a vision of the house, seeing the figures converging to her, irresistibly impelled by the power of their peculiar desires or passions.

At this moment she felt that nothing was concealed from her. She thought that complete, finished characters sprang up as, rapidly, she reviewed her knowledges: Miss Wilson's tremendous sentiment, irrational beliefs, and theoretical vision of life; Miss Hyde happy merely through her contacts with others, and oppressed at times by the truth of the imperfection of these contacts, the egoism and indifference of others, the inequality of life; injustice, sadness, loneliness; Miss Hammond, "mental"; Mrs. Jesson, jealous, fierce, unjust; Marie——

Dido's mind arbitrarily thrust upon her the fact that, for the time at least, all these people were living in and were inspired to greater self-revelation by an emotional atmosphere which she alone had created. If she were not in the house these people might be different. She, not Marie, was the provocative influence. Because of her they were expressing themselves in word and action.

And at once she saw how incomplete her knowledges were. These people, disordered by her presence, were working out their characters and—immense mystery again—she could not divine the directions they moved in. She saw their immediate reactions but an hour hence—what would any one of them say or do then? She didn't know. Darkness, silence. She was without certitude.

She opened a biscuit tin with an abrupt movement.

"I'm sure I can't be in love," she thought. "I've hardly thought of him since. The whole thing seems hopelessly involved with other people. It's a most electric atmosphere. I could really believe that something was going to happen. How absurd!"

Miss Hyde's chatter ran on. Dido moved quickly near to Hilda. Hilda raised a stubbornly uncomprehending face. She picked up the tray and went out with it.

Oh, it was wretched. To have, just when she should be happy, voluptuously brooding over her romance, full of hope and gentle excitement, maturing, dreaming, all these inimical waves of other people's feelings rolling up to her, menacing her with a storm. It was like that. Seeing, hearing, feeling, the rush and babble of the first waves with a sense of the great sea unquiet and strong beyond.

She turned impulsively to Miss Hyde. "Isn't everything fearfully quiet! I feel all on edge." She laughed naturally. "I'm so glad you're better. The house seems to me as if every one's ill. I want to walk on tip-toe."

She was caught back into light, tranquillity, warmth, by the fineness of Miss Hyde's response.

Miss Hyde seized Dido's hand and pressed it close between both her own. She shook it up and down. "You must be out of sorts. You're always so bright. Saucy—that's what I call you. It's the gloomy weather. You're depressed. Like I was. You'll be better when you've had a cup of tea. Now you go along and sit down and I'll give you a cup. You're nervy. I'm going to nurse you—that's what I'm going to do. I'm all right, thanks to you—that pain's quite gone. I thought it might come back when I moved about, but it hasn't. Now you're not to do a thing. A good cup of tea, and a pill to-night. It's the weather. Nasty heavy days. They're depressing. Come along."

Dido laughed. She let Miss Hyde pull her towards the door. Tenderly she gazed down at the peak of gray hair, the wedge of pale, shining, odd face below.

With archness Miss Hyde glanced back. "You're over-excited. I know. You want your mother, that's who you want. Some one to talk to. I can't take her place, but I'll do my best. Look at me, like a little ship pulling a great big one."

Dear little woman, ardently hearing and responding to the appeals of all those other existences which drifted round; continually occupied in demonstrating her own reality, conceiving life only as a splendid companionship with other

mortals, affrighted by any glimpse of incompatibility or severance, filled, by the sense of alliance, almost with bliss.

They crossed the somber hall. The enigmatical and reticent spaces of the house lay round them. But they were less real than the pressure of Miss Hyde's hands, warm and firm.

II

For several hours after tea they sat in their dining-room. At eight o'clock Dido put on a waterproof hat and coat and went out on to the verandah.

She stood there, unthinking and grave. Rain was still falling, but less violently. Everywhere her eye caught wet gleams and fading shapes.

She stepped off the verandah on to the wanly staring pulpy yellow path. Walking backwards and forwards she thought of Hob.

A few minutes later Mrs. Jesson came through the drawing-room on to the verandah. Resting her hand on one of its red brick supports she looked at Dido.

Dido diffidently smiled.

There was no change in Mrs. Jesson's gloomy stare. Her little, unhappy eyes looked out between red lids which had a squeezed-in appearance on either side of her broad and massive nose. Her features seemed larger. There was no congruity between her expression and her ornaments of amber and gold, her elaborate dress. She looked neither peaceful nor light.

"You don't mind the rain?" she said in a harsh, abrupt voice.

"I love it."

Unwaveringly Mrs. Jesson studied her. "Marie always says Rowe Green looks its best in rain," she said in the same rough tone. "I can't see it myself. I think it looks very dreary. But I've never seen the beauty of the place, I know. I've lived here thirty years and I don't feel it's home yet."

She stared at her hand sprawling on the brickwork.

"You feel in exile?" Dido suggested.

Mrs. Jesson looked back with a swift, dim smile. "Yes. That's just what I do feel. I'm an American, you know. I long to go back there. I thought I should end my life there, but Marie wanted to live here."

She stopped, her gaze on the black, glistening trees delicately pointing with their leaves and twigs, motionless, as if for ever suspended in that position. A peculiar, thin high-light fell on her from the brownish sky. It gave to her face and to the evening the look of being touched with a blight.

After a pause of struggle, discernible to Dido though expressed only in that fixed gaze, that stiff body, she went on.

"I say I want to go back, and so I do. But I would gladly relinquish all thought of returning to have the—the certainty that Marie was going to settle down near me, if not with me. If ever you're a mother you'll know the dread, the—the agony you have—fearing some harm will befall the child, something—you can't avert—with all your love. I want her to settle down. I shan't know a moment's peace of mind until I see her married."

She turned, with something of grandeur in her directness,

her emphasis. "I think I soon shall see her married. Mr. Ramsay comes here to see her. He came down here because she is here. She told me that she expected he would ask her to marry him. I hope he will. I—I most earnestly—hope he will."

She stared at Dido, but scarcely saw her. She was terrified by her own action. She waited for Marie to descend violently on her, as she might have waited for death.

But neither voice nor sound followed the despairing recklessness of those words. The thoughts which had determined her swept again through her mind, insidiously reassuring her.

"He hasn't gone far," she thought. "There hasn't been time. If she went away and avoided him he'd come back to Marie. I believe if she knew the truth she'd leave him alone. She looks a good girl. And he is Marie's. He came here after Marie."

Dido said "Yes," without expression, without a glance. She trembled. Her brain shouted a ferocious negation, "No, no, no," but the thing she was repelling was formless, vague.

Mrs. Jesson did not heed the spoken assent, nor guess the voiceless denial. She was shaken by a sense of the opportunities of her solitude here with Dido. In her desperation she was no longer capable of sane and reasonable perception; she was at the mercy of her impulses.

Beautiful and seductive illusions floated across her mind. She lost sight of the realities of human nature; her heart beating unevenly, her thumb brushing cement out from the bricks, she gazed, dazzled, at theories of human conduct;

her head became a welter of remembered fragments from the didactical poems of Matthew Arnold, Cowper, and Newman; duty, abnegation—themes of sermons recurred to her.

The speed of her mental movements made her hot. She shook one arm to which her sleeves clung damply. She opened her mouth, breathing the earth-smelling air, the air heavy with the odors of dead and rotting plants, of scum on still water, of soaked hayrick, and massed manure.

The rain had ceased. The sky to the west was black, but a watery yellow burnt weakly in the south, a long slat above the woodlands. Over the Green the light slid shaded in steel and dim gray. Cold glitters came from leaves hanging and fallen, and the pools were cold and pale like daylight moons, streams in the sand were thick and without gleam; clear and colorless on the road.

She began to speak.

“I’m old. I ought to be wiser than you. But it takes us all our life to learn things, and then when we have learnt them it’s time for us to die. When I look back I can see all the things I ought to have done. I should do differently now if I had those times over again, but we aren’t given the chance. I can see that all my unhappiness——” She stared at her thumb and the little cloud of falling dust. “I have had unhappiness, though my life has been a happy one. I had the best man God ever made for a husband, I think. And I have a child. My life has been a happy one; but pain has come to me and trouble—and—looking back—I see that it all came from not doing my duty—or from other people not doing theirs. You can only be happy by doing your duty. I’ve learnt that. Sacrifice—and love,

and living for others—and trusting that everything is ordered for the best—that means happiness.”

She forgot that she was speaking with a purpose. She smiled at Dido. “I’m seventy, and it’s taken me all my life to learn that. And—when I think that Marie has to go through all the suffering—and mistakes—before she knows it, I . . .” She looked round her with a blind, glassy gaze—“I feel that life is a terrible thing. I can’t tell her. She must learn for herself. I can only stand by and watch her—making the mistakes I made. Even if she marries she isn’t sure of happiness; she can’t have a better man than I had, and I made a lot of unhappiness for myself through ignorance. But I want her to marry. A good man. She’s not like me; she’s clever and artistic. I don’t understand a lot of things; I’m—I’m bewildered by modern ways. She—she’s modern—and passionate—she feels a lot—she don’t know how to be patient—and I can’t help her. I can only stand and watch.”

The silence drowned them both; it held the land with a suffocating pressure. The little stones in the path stared up like dull eyeballs. Tiny oozing ridges of sand stood round Dido’s boots.

Her cheeks were burning. An immense pity and sorrow filled her heart, pity for Mrs. Jesson, pity for herself, sorrow over the melancholy, tragic, and beautiful picture of human life which had formed for her out of Mrs. Jesson’s words. She had never before felt so helpless and small. She looked up at Mrs. Jesson and longed to run away from that sturdy figure, that rugged and furrowed face. Behind Mrs. Jesson the drawing-room was a scoop of black; she had

a vision of all the rooms as being scooped out black and silent from the strong body of the house. Small passionate figures passed in smooth procession before her—all the people, all the people, converging on her, working out their characters, angry, disordered, at a loss.

Oh, she was miserable and resentful. Even Hob presented her with pain and incertitude. Had he loved Marie; behaved badly; philandered about from one to the other?

She met Mrs. Jesson's eyes. There was something appealing and beautiful in her flushed round cheeks, her unquivering but tender lips, her slightly dilated nostrils, her courageous young eyes. She looked large and simple, stilled by the sudden apparition of intangible terrors, daunted, but not put to flight.

Mrs. Jesson's thumb sank deep into the dry cement. She felt as if she had come up against something immutable, solid, destructive. She felt bruised, and shaken as if with a recoil. Dido was pretty. With a growing chill Mrs. Jesson stared at that small, warm, fine round face, that clever and youthful brow.

She had a moment's vision of her own futility, a sense of something inexorable and predestined bearing down upon her. With all her love she could not avert this thing.

She hated Dido. Her eyes glared; she wanted to stride out on to the path and with a vehement gesture remove that figure. She mumbled, she pulled at her skirt, she felt herself rocking in an awful struggle with destiny, with laws and conventions, with the supreme force to which nightly she prayed. The terror and despair that had swept over her in the bedroom this afternoon surged in her again.

There was a sharp sound as one of the dining-room casements opened; Marie put out her head; her sparkling black glance swept them both.

"Those buttonholes are ready for you, mother mine," she said. "Are you a good button-holer, Miss Baird? I haven't been reduced to doing them since the days when May and I were in Kensington together at the art shop. I must tell you about that some day. Remind me. It supplied me with some of my *loveliest* memories. They alone will make my old age tolerable."

Mrs. Jesson had gone in, instantly, quickly. Dido said "Yes." As Marie glanced round towards the opening dining-room door, Dido almost ran away out of the garden, on to the road which sped towards the swimming vapors of the hills.

III

Mrs. Jesson went up to bed early that night.

When she reached Miss Hammond's door she stopped. With the stiffness and vacant look of an automaton she put her candle down on the table in the recess by Bessie's door, and knocked.

She heard a stir within and then Miss Hammond's heady little "Yes?"

"May I come in, Bessie?"

"Yes. Do. I'm not in bed yet."

Mrs. Jesson went in.

"Why aren't you in bed, Bessie? You came up some time ago."

"I know I did. I've been reading. I'm going now though."

Miss Hammond was sitting in an arm-chair by the small table near her bed. Her hair was loose; her hands, doubled on the neck of her dressing-gown, looked unhealthy and inert. A Bible lay open on the table; beside it was a thermos flask and a plate of bread-and-butter. Set between these things and the narrow whiteness of the bed, a broad, soft, neckless figure, she gazed at Mrs. Jesson.

Mrs. Jesson said, still holding the door-knob: "You're all right, Bessie? Your head isn't bad?"

"It does ache a little; only a little though. Perhaps a sleep will do me good."

"Well, Bessie, why aren't you in bed? I think it's very silly when your head's bad to sit up reading. Would you like me to read to you?"

"No, thank you. So kind of you. You want to go to bed yourself. You look tired."

"I am tired, Bessie."

A crease ran along Miss Hammond's dressing-gown from under her hand as though she had suddenly squeezed the stuff. There was a perceptible movement of her eyes which made them seem like living things embedded in a senseless shape of matter.

"And afraid?" she brought out sharply—"like you were the other night. Tired and afraid."

Mrs. Jesson frowned. A hot, airless house, painful thoughts, a great weariness of spirit and body, and now Bessie to soothe and reassure.

She spoke in a complaining, exasperated voice. "Oh,

Bessie, I told you not to think anything of those words. You know that the things I'm afraid of are——”

She had a pause, staring over that round, bulging head in the arm-chair, while she sought for words. Miss Hammond looked with a complete absence of expression into the passage where the candlelight wandered like a yellow smoke. Her eyes came back to Mrs. Jesson as the latter went on.

“——are the disciplines we all have to endure. There's nothing for you to be afraid of.” She turned, looking unseeingly into the passage, and then pushed the door to. Her gaze returned to the wall over Bessie's head. “It isn't the first time in my life I've been afraid. You can't be a mother without seeing danger and pain—and difficulty—everywhere. It's because I can't force myself to see that Marie must take life as it is—that the ways of—of life can't be altered for her. I can't realize that there's a— a limit to my power. I love her so that I've the will to stand between her and all trouble. But I haven't the power. There's something stronger than me. With all my love I'm not allowed to—to—avert any disappointment which may threaten her. We're all of us given strength—and— free will—to a certain extent, and beyond that extent we're helpless. There's something greater than us, greater even than mother-love.”

She had forgotten Bessie. She was speaking as before a court of inquiry; she was engaged in an endless and hopeless argument with an invisible critic, with that passionate and wild counselor—her own heart.

Silence followed her words. Unwinkingly Bessie looked

at her. Outside there were quiet sounds—some one coming upstairs, entering the bathroom, the rushing of water into the bath, the shutting of a window.

Mrs. Jesson lowered her eyes to the table.

“I didn’t come in to talk about myself,” she said, “but to see if you were all right. Have you everything you want?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“You’ve got your bread-and-butter for the night, and your flask. Would you like anything now?”

“No, thank you.”

Mrs. Jesson stared absently at the meal which was to sustain Bessie in the small hours if she could not sleep or awoke feeling weak and apprehensive. She felt soothed, drugged, by the quietude and simplicity of the room, by the passive homely-looking bulk of Bessie’s figure. She shrank from the solitude, the memories, the inevitable brooding reverie which awaited her in her own room. Beyond the curtained window lay not the Surrey fields, the Wealden lanes and meadows, the marshlands, the reedy watercourses, all sunken in a moonless night, but only the night itself, empty, vast, and in the heart of it the lusterless disk of the sea moaning and stirring, far off—America, her sisters, the house there, the rooms bloomed with light wherein dark heads turned, and kind, slightly hollowed little faces. Her sisters were all like mother; only she resembled her father.

Her throat contracted. Through Bessie she touched that continent, that house, those people. But she couldn’t talk to Bessie; she mustn’t—Bessie must not be worried. Be-

sides, she wouldn't understand. Ada would understand; she was a mother herself—Ada, her favorite sister.

Ada—thousands of miles separated her from Ada. Death separated her from Henry. She was without an ally, without an accomplice, without a guide.

“Then you've got everything you want, Bessie?”

“Everything, thank you.”

“And you'll go to bed at once, won't you? It's so silly to sit up.”

“Yes, I will.” Miss Hammond nodded; her lips parted in a smile under motionless, stern eyes.

“Good night, Bessie.”

“Good night.”

Mrs. Jesson went out from the room with a vague sense of it as being beyond the revolutions of thought and feeling, stable, serene. Wood, china, fabric, and Bessie—they were all fixed in an immense repose together.

As she picked up her candle she couldn't hear a sound in the room; it might have been empty of any human creature; that old woman sitting there in her shapeless and bilious immobility might have been a garmented image, a rendering in art of passive contemplation.

Mrs. Jesson went into her own room. She closed the door. Carefully she crossed to the dressing-table and put down the candle. For an instant she stood looking at its loose little golden plume.

“No good can come of brooding,” she thought. “I shall make myself ill and then I shan't be fit to help her. She may turn to me soon. I must be sensible, and have faith. I'm old—I ought to be able to control myself.”

She lighted the gas, and then blew out the candle. She had a moment of rigid staring at the room.

There Marie's cradle had stood. Round and round that bed she ran in her vest after her bath every night. Under this bracket she sat putting her hair up for the first time—and it wouldn't keep up—and she threw the comb at her mother. She was seventeen then, and she sobbed for half an hour afterwards with remorse. Passionate, wilful, brilliant.

Now she was old enough to marry. And could not have the man she wanted.

The floor creaked under Mrs. Jesson's heavy and rapid tread as she went to the window and drew the curtains. Then, with angular, rough movements, she began to undress.

IV

Dido and Hilda also went to bed early. But after Hilda's first slight restlessness had subsided, and when her breathing sounded regular and quiet, Dido sat up in her bed.

She drew her knees into a ridge and clasped this with her arms. She looked across her table with its books, candlestick, watch, and glass of lime-juice, at the decently covered mound which was Hilda.

Slowly her eyes moved away to the window. She began to think.

Had Hob ever made love to Marie? Did he really care for Marie now? Had she herself been as precipitate and unreasonable as Hilda?

"I'm not in love with him," she thought, "but I like him and if he means, by waiting about for me and going with me and looking like that at me, that he admires me and wants to see if he does more than admire me, then I think I'm willing to let him. I am willing. I could love him, if I let myself. But if he is a flirt and is behaving badly to Marie, then I could forget him and snub him without difficulty. It's only just begun."

She frowned. She didn't want to repulse him.

She saw his face, his high, pale head, his body, all lightness and vigor, his teeth, cutting sharply into a pipe, his long nose and chin with their look of neatly and cleanly severing the different knots of life's problems and clearing a space for active, forceful existence.

"I'm not mistaken. I'm not. He's years younger than Marie. She looks awfully old the first thing in the morning. But she's charming, and he saw a lot of her and he admired her—she knocked him off his feet a little. She would. She does me—though I see through her. But a man wouldn't. Not a man his age—he only looks a boy for all that calm and resolution. And he came down to see her in her own home, and *then* he saw Hilda and me and the contrast scattered him. He *looked* scattered that first night. The scales fell from his eyes!"

Her little teeth were clenched in a silent laugh, and she hugged her knees. "I don't believe he'd gone far with Marie. Marie would say he had. 'Behold my captive, my slave. A dear boy—he simply worships me.' She said that. And that darling old woman believed her. I'm most awfully sorry for Mrs. Jesson."

She passed into a state of slow, untiring thought. First one and then another memory or intuition rose into prominence, so that she seemed to be drifting down a broad stream past strange and indefinite regions; she felt herself growing older; every moment of insight seemed to develop her mentally and morally; this brooding in the dim room, on the fringe of the soft sounds in the house, became a momentous thing, a period of growth, a ripening. There was something crucial about it.

It was her first deliberate meditation on love and marriage. It seemed to her that all the solemnities of life presented themselves to her in turn—love, the ethics of our responsibility towards other humans, motherhood, virtue—she felt that they were all involved in this matter of Hob's relations to herself and Marie.

Knowing nothing of May Bessant's irregular union with Louis Gosden and Hob's knowledge of this through a betrayal of confidence on the part of Mr. Billy Hammond, Louis' cousin, she sought uncertainly for some shock administered by Marie to Hob's moral sense. She felt profoundly that it was Hob's possession of a moral sense which had turned him from Marie to herself. Had she known about May and Marie's unmoral views everything would have been clear to her, but she did not know; she only divined, with a feeling of positive clairvoyance, that something had withered Hob's infatuation and driven him out into the luminous open spaces of her own orbit and Hilda's.

He may have admired Marie—he did, he did, she silently conceded—he followed Marie here, but she knew—she

harshly pressed the bones of her arms against the bones of her legs to beat the knowledge into her very limbs—she knew that for him Marie had faded. Faded! She opened her eyes widely.

“That’s just what she hasn’t done. She blazes—like a sunflower—or a furnace. He sees she’s coarse—and Hilda’s like a star. No one could show Marie up more than Hilda does. . . . He is good. She’s offended him—perhaps by the way she treats her mother. He’s simple really, and he has all the prejudices and principles I have. He said this morning that the modern woman was putrid—and he said their clothes were ghastly and they only dressed for men. And he was awfully just and sensible about Ireland. He *has* opinions—and he’s quiet—he thinks. And he was perfectly sweet about Miss Hammond. And he said Mrs. Jesson was the nicest person he’d ever met.”

She lifted her head and looked about her. She felt happy and yet uneasy. Her fluent reflections seemed suddenly, in the face of the silence, the dark, the existence, beyond the door, of the other rooms and their unknowable scenes, childish, futile, pathetically inadequate. Such a light little babble of words—and the immense incertitude remained. They couldn’t dispel it. She knew, absolutely, nothing. She believed she was right, but how slight were the things she relied on. Opinions as to the Irish difficulty, deference towards old women, indictments of modern femininity—she didn’t know him, it was impossible to know anybody, it was all darkness and silence. She didn’t like men. She wished he hadn’t come. If mother were here, a saner and wiser eye would be turned upon him. She, Dido, was a

silly, girlish, sentimental little fool, expressing herself in schoolgirl phrases.

She swung her long legs out of the bed; her night-dress swathed them closely. There was no movement from Hilda. She stood up on the cool, equal surface of the carpet.

Most strange and secret the room lay about her. She had a moment of wonder at it and at her presence in its midst. It was as if one lived in a world of illusion for long, suave periods, and then for a moment veils were stripped away and the amazing reality was seen, only to be lost before understanding came, and the perception of order and aim under apparent chaos.

She stared at the roller of Hilda's body in the center of the narrow bed. That thing was Hilda. And Hilda was—what was Hilda? What were they all? Strange things; captives; working out a penal sentence. She felt she wanted to go over and prod that ridiculous, tidy roll which was Hilda.

She curled her toes. Hilda would start up with a faint shriek; she could see the oval of Hilda's amazed face and the round eyes fixed in it!

She crossed quickly, smilingly, to the window.

If the means of communication between herself and Hob were small, they were no smaller than those between herself and the women in the house. Expressions of opinion, half-confidences, glances, gestures—out of these one constructed the secrets of being. She knew all the women as well as it was permitted one to know these dim sharers of human existence. And she knew Hob; with every interview she would know him better. Besides, there were ac-

tions to learn by; she had forgotten actions; Hob's action in turning from Marie to her proved him good, congenial, clear-sighted.

"Oh, what conceit!"

But it wasn't herself; it was the things she stood for; traditional morals, simplicity, modesty, a serious creed of duty—all the things mother so splendidly followed.

"Odious little prig," she rebuked herself.

She leant against the window seat and gazed at the stars burning without a flicker in the clear sky. She felt the presence of the three hills arched up, immovable, solid, in the fog; they seemed to cut off Rowe Green from the rest of Surrey, pressing it into Sussex. The whole soaked fog-embedded breadth of the Weald lay behind under the stare of the glossy sky and the amber flaming of the stars.

How small the house seemed, cut up into segments in each of which vehement and strong currents swirled!

Miss Wilson . . .

Dido turned from the window. How could Miss Wilson be so mad? To imagine Jimmy Ainger was in love with her! Poor Jimmy! But the colossal, the astounding, stupidity of such a thought! Illusion! Delusion! Didn't Miss Wilson see life as it was at all? One didn't know which to give her—pity or contempt.

Dido had a swift picture of Miss Wilson's bedroom and Miss Wilson lying in bed, another inscrutable tight roller with a wild haze of hair at the top; she counted the thumps of Miss Wilson's heart against the bed, discerned the tumultuous eddy of thoughts, images, and dreams in Miss

Wilson's mind. The sudden stark reality of Hob's developing love leapt at her as she analyzed the other women's emotions. She hadn't thought of it in detail before, in its physical expression. Did Miss Wilson dream of Jimmy's kisses?

Dido's heart raced, she lifted her hands to her cheeks, mentally she fled leagues away from the realities of her position, over great empty cool tracks, pursued by Hob, awaited by Hob. Wonderful phenomenon. Hob was everywhere; he hunted and he summoned; she fled from him, she groped towards him.

At the top and at the bottom of her door light washed, soft and yellow. She heard the drag of slippers. Some one with a candle was walking up the passage. She heard a tapping on a door not far from her own.

After a minute Miss Hammond's voice weakly rose. "It's only me—Bessie. I wondered if you were all right. So sorry to disturb you. Don't get up."

A door opened; Mrs. Jesson's voice. "How silly of you, Bessie. Why shouldn't I be all right? Haven't you been to bed?"

"Yes, I have, but I couldn't sleep. You're all right, then? So sorry to make you get up. I was afraid you were worried."

"No more worried than a mother expects to be. I shan't be able to say anything to you, Bessie, if you get so upset. Wandering about on a damp night like this. Shall I come and sit with you till you go to sleep? Or would you like anything to eat?"

"No, no, I'm quite all right. I'll go back to bed now. You're always doing something for me. I feel I want to do something for you. So kind and good."

Mrs. Jesson gave a vexed little laugh. "You go back to bed, Bessie, and be sensible. You're sure you don't want anything? Would you like some beef-tea?"

"No, thank you. I've got my flask and bread-and-butter. Don't be angry with me for disturbing you. Good night. I won't come again."

"No, don't, dear, because it's so senseless. Go to sleep. I'm all right. There's nothing for you to worry about at all."

"All right. I won't. Good night. So sorry . . ."

The door closed, the light wavered in a soft splotch over the ceiling, over the floor; darkness came down like a shutter.

With a large gesture of tenderness Dido gathered the life of the house to herself. Dear, mysterious, lonely people! Where were they all being driven! If only she could slip into Hilda's bed; if only mother were here to be brimmed with Dido's impressions.

The life of the house filtered through the door, spread over the room, wrapped her round, gently now, like the first shallow waves of a sea. It came from in front; but behind her, flowing in from the external world, was another force. The house; Hob; she watched their convergencies on her.

All brought about by Marie's coming.

She got into bed. How deep the silence was! There

were no sounds in the house now. Was he thinking about her, or not?

Invincible incertitude. Vaguely blissful, deeply compassionate, she waited for it to end.

CHAPTER VI

CONVERSATIONS

I

NEXT morning there was pastry to be made. Dido always made pastry on Saturday—apple tarts, jam tarts, jam fingers—and Miss Hyde roasted a duck as well as a joint that they might have a cold lunch on Sunday and be able, therefore, to go to church.

At about ten o'clock Dido's hands were covered with flour, her face was scarlet, there was a smear of flour on her hair where she had tucked it austerely behind her ears. Over an array of little tins, basins, sunken yellow bags of flour, and dishes of lard and butter, she talked of village matters with Hilda. Slight noises overhead were roused by Miss Hyde making the beds; loud noises on the stairs and afterwards in the drawing-room were signs that Marie's bedding, removed from the verandah because of the heavy night-mists, was again descending.

"It will be just as damp to-night," Hilda commented. "I can't imagine how she can do it."

Dido, rolling out the pastry, merely showed her teeth in a joyous little smile.

She cut the pastry into shapes, set these in the tins, pushed them towards Hilda that Hilda might fill them with

jam, and all the time she felt the tentative, uncertain return of Hilda's spirit back from distances; she caught the delicate language of Hilda's long stares, calm withdrawals, and softer smiles.

Dear Hilda, dear Hilda. She was coming back. Dido didn't care to act. She had a sense of Hilda as wild and shy and swift. Her response must be as gentle, as almost imperceptible as Hilda's invitation. They would unite again beautifully without word, probably without a glance; the most tremendous exigency of the position being perfectly to act as though there had never been any severance at all.

And under this absorption with Hilda's spiritual movements there was the continual faint question, "Will he come to-day, or do anything significant?"

"Is that the lot?" Hilda asked, from a kneeling position before the gas-stove.

"Yes. I am hot. I'm going in the garden when I've washed my hands. Miss Hyde will be down by then."

"I wonder if they'll ever have any bladder lard," Hilda said patiently, her eyes dwelling on the table. "I don't think that man deserves to do well. He never has anything."

Dido, on her way to the door, glanced back. Beamingly she observed Hilda's fair, arched brows, her look of solemnly realizing the importance of lard in the scheme of things. Hilda, at that moment, wasn't thinking of Hob nor of love, she was considering whether she should ask the carrier to bring her some bladder lard from Horsham. She had a lovely cloudless and simple look. Dido, perceiving that

practical gaze, knew that Hilda's vanity alone had been hurt; she didn't love Hob.

"Shall I ask Wallis to bring a pound from Horsham?" Hilda said.

"I knew you were thinking that! I should. This man's such a fearful scandalmonger too. He was telling me the most terrible stories about old Mrs. Matthews and her relatives the other morning. I'm sure they can't have been true. I won't be a minute. See they don't burn, there's an angel. I'll send Miss Hyde down at once."

She ran up the warm staircase.

"She doesn't love him. I am so glad. It was only pique—as I thought. Everything will soon be the same again."

She went merrily into the bathroom.

A little later she walked up the garden with Hilda.

When they came in view of the verandah a sonorous shout arrested them. They turned to see Marie on her bed, waving a spoon in invitation.

"Come and have some tea," she cried.

They joined her.

"I've just washed my head," she said. "Sit down. Do have a spot of tea."

Dido gave her a hard, bright little glance. "Inveterate tea-drinker!" she exclaimed, opening a camp-chair. "I'm too hot. I've been cooking."

"How beautifully domestic of you!" Marie drank some tea. Her hair hung in wet tails over her wrists. Her cheeks looked fresh and damp but without shapeliness, without delicacy. Her nose seemed to overhang her mouth. There was a peculiar enigmatical smile in her eyes.

She put down her cup and, still smiling but subtly hostile and contemptuous, gazed at Dido. "Perhaps you feel fitted for a domestic life?" she suggested. "Something very respectable and worthy—utilitarian." She clasped her hands and laughed with that same look of derision, almost of libertinism.

"How hopelessly bourgeois it sounds!" Dido exclaimed, gleefully smiling back. "I'm ashamed of my proficiency. I suppose I ought to be going about in tango trousers instead of an apron. I do wear an apron! Isn't it awful?"

Marie did not answer. She looked; slowly, dreamily she withdrew her look and directed it at the teapot. She suggested an amused contemplation of Dido's moral and mental aspects. From some enlightened, emancipated sphere she tolerantly and with a shrug looked down on Dido.

Hilda, simpering a little in an indeterminate state between the conclusion of her last laugh and readiness for her next, gazed from one to the other. Her lips, glued evenly together, promised a contented silence. Her large eyes became gradually a little shrewd and sharp.

"I dislike cooking," Marie continued. "If I *have* to do any I make it endurable by thinking hard all the time of something else—what a splendid time I had in the Pyrenees or in America, or in recalling some of my experiences with May—when we rambled round the Docks at midnight, for instance, with a private detective and a subaltern we knew. Lovely."

She turned quickly. "What do you think of that book on Spiritualism?" she demanded.

"Oh, it made me laugh," Dido said, with a delighted air

of retrospection. "Hilda and I shouted over the part where the son says he doesn't get such good pastry in heaven as his mother made! We found it full of unconscious humor. I must return it to you."

"Hmm." Marie did not laugh. She spoke in a grave, rather distant manner. "Still, that's only due to the pre-conceived idea. Your finding it funny, I mean. You don't believe in a concrete heaven and your imagination can't apparently be broadened." She laughed, her face forming into thick folds. "I was like you once, but I've always approached things with an open mind, and I believe in spiritualism. I'm psychic. I've been told that I've strong mediumistic powers—I'm an uncontrolled medium. I could be in a lunatic asylum in six months if I let myself go." She resonantly laughed, swaying on the bed, chill, glittering drops swinging off from the tips of her hair. "I've known for years that I could, but I've tremendous self-control. I strike you as sane, don't I? You wouldn't expect me to be psychic, would you?"

"Awfully sane," Dido said. There was a faint throaty sound from Hilda. They both looked steadily at Marie. Hilda, under her amazement, had an intelligent air; Dido's lips curled upwards at the corners; her eyes were brilliantly alert. She inwardly laughed over this bold, angered assertion of personality. Marie's endeavor was so palpable. She was asserting her reality. Humiliated by Hob, she strove to exalt herself into a flaming and original force. She wanted to be seen as she saw herself, impressive, masterful, influential. She felt herself fading out of sight through her failure to maintain supremacy in the group.

She saw Dido turned from her, unheeding, perhaps absolutely forgetful. She was outdistanced, disregarded, real only to herself. Insupportable position for Marie so desirous of radiant prominence, with all hearts impressed and all eyes held!

She had, somehow, to drag them back to a consideration, an acknowledgment, of her potency, her superb presence, seductive and irresistible, in their midst.

“I think I seem a very well-balanced person,” she asserted, “so perhaps my experiences will have some weight with you. I should never dream of becoming a professional medium. You see, I’m uncontrolled. It wouldn’t be safe. I’ve been warned by a spiritualistic friend not to be tempted, even though huge sums of money were offered me. They say my powers are extraordinary. This is in confidence.” She glanced round into the drawing-room. “There’s no one about, is there? I get no sympathy from my own family. Mother doesn’t understand me. She’s the most practical and unimaginative person alive. If I told her devils had been fighting all night to keep my soul from returning to my body she’d say, ‘Have a cup of tea, dear. You’re liverish.’ I was so obliged to you for the discreet way you removed the book that morning she stole upon us. She’d be horrified if she saw it. I had to smuggle it carefully into the house. I have to keep all my spiritual adventures to myself. I’ve had some dreadful hours. You see—I’m not a Christian. I’m an absolute pagan in the way I turn to Nature—or a pantheist. I believe in a Supreme Being, but I consider Christianity merely one form of a universal religion. And I believe that devils try to obtain possession of us. I’m

sure they do. There's one after me—a mulatto. I've never met a mulatto in the flesh, but night after night this man has appeared to me when I've been out of my body."

On her swift, low monologue Hilda's voice broke, squeaky, and suggestive of impending mental collapse. "Out of your body!" Hilda exclaimed. "What in the world is that?"

Dido pressed Hilda's foot with hers. The pressure was instantly returned. Dido had a momentary perception of Hilda's perfect re-establishment by her side. Hilda was at hand again, responsive to all calls, by the relevance of her responses disclosing luminous moments of attention to Dido's feelings.

"Oh, something very unpleasant," Marie replied laughing. "It's the spirits trying to get you over to the other side. Spiritualists always speak of the Other Side, you know, not heaven. This mulatto wants me. We have terrific struggles. He was bending over me the other night, and I grabbed the pillow and simply threw it at him with a shriek of 'Damn you!' I found myself standing out on the path there. It sounds mad."

Her burst of laughter was followed by a howl from the other side of the hedge.

"It's Jimmy and Mr. Ramsay," Dido said.

Marie turned unfathomable eyes towards the hedge.

"Oh yes. . . . I'm most fearfully psychic. And I have extraordinary telepathic powers too. I'll tell you about them another time."

She sprang off the bed and, swinging her round hips, throwing back her hair with a fine arrogance, walked towards the hedge.

The stiff hair and round eyes of Jimmy, and Hob's head and shoulders were visible above it. Hob was looking into the verandah.

"I don't like her," Hilda whispered. "She doesn't like you either. She was showing off. I can't imagine any one believing such rubbish. I think it's awfully silly. And it's really rude to talk so much about herself. I wish you'd snub her, Dido."

Dido's heart was throbbing. She turned her eyes towards Hilda, but she lifted them no higher than Hilda's small rather hollow throat.

Then with an only just perceptible effort Hilda added:

"But it's because she's jealous of you that she talks like that. You needn't do anything. She's furious about Mr. Ramsay. I should have hated him to have her."

Eloquently they gazed at each other. Hilda's face had grown a little loose and damp; she had, with her girlish, narrow figure, the faint blue marks under her eyes, her pure and pale lips, the look of something set apart, cloistered, a pathetic and yet desirable look. In her expression of unfulfilment she was beautiful. The shadow of a sterile but exquisite middle-age seemed to touch her subtly.

Dido's nostrils dilated. She lifted her burning eyes to Hilda and then at once averted them. She was not thinking. She had only a sense of light; wide vistas of light stretched round her, permanent, richer than the light of day.

II

Marie was returning with the two men. Hob's eyes were

lowered. Jimmy appeared excited. He moved his short legs jerkily, smoothed the back of his head, cast wooden glances round him, folded his under lip over his upper in a kind of desperate determination.

He looked at the cousins as at two more pieces thrust upon the unconscionable litter of the garden. He had, quite palpably, arrived at that outlook: Marie—and a jumble of things.

Hob and Dido glanced at each other. They, then, immediately turned to Jimmy and Marie.

“Thank you. I will,” Jimmy said, gazing at the teapot.

“You won’t,” Marie retorted. “There isn’t a spot left.”

She gave Hob a veiled, absent look.

Jimmy moved about, staring at them all, talking, but obviously preoccupied. “That—that—that *fellow*”—he indicated Hob—“has been rolling me up on the subject of the British working-man. Confound it. What’s the British working-man to me that I should turn my fine intellect to his defense? Simply because I expressed a reasonable sympathy with the miners.”

“What did he say?” Marie asked.

“Oh, a lot of nasty hard technical stuff.” Jimmy grimaced horribly. “Dull! Dull! A most uninteresting fellow.”

Hilda was laughing. Marie, her eyes half closed, still idly scrutinized Hob.

Hob’s gaze, pale and diffuse like moonlight, wandered towards Dido. There was an angularity about his attitude; he seemed scarcely more natural than Jimmy.

“The nucleus of the matter,” he said, “was my diffident suggestion that the working-classes haven’t any sense of the

influence of environment. That is to say, they can't grasp the fact, when they're slating the aristocracy, that if they were in the aristocrat's place they would do exactly the same thing. It's all a matter of training and circumstance—our outlook is. We're the creatures of our conditions. I've a sort of theory that accretions of all kinds settle on our surfaces. In our contacts with each other and our conditions, I mean. I imagine I'm talking awful rot and wandering from the point, but it's wobbling about in my head—the notion that we gather up all sorts of things from our environment. That's why there are so many lunatics about now—they're amassing spooks and mud and complexes. Things settle on them—beastly things . . .”

“Oh, ain't 'e 'orrid,” Jimmy cried. “Like flies on a corpse. Disgusting simile.”

“I apologize.” Hob bowed to them all. “I now bring round the hat for the pennies.”

“We've lost the British working-man completely,” Dido said.

Hob spun round to her. “He was never really in it. And anyhow, I don't claim coherence. I'm like the novelists—I succeed with my analysis, but fail in my synthesis. . . . But, as a matter of fact, I've simply been thinking about people and temperamental differences; thinking that, after all, convention isn't such a bad thing.”

There was silence. All avoided looking at each other; no one moved. But Dido's feeling of taking irrevocable steps into new and perilous realms was intense. How swiftly and without swerve she and Hob traveled towards each other. The implications of his work were like torches

held aloft, steady, bright, in the shadowy places wherein she moved. With her eyes on them she trod firmly, upheld, reassured. She saw him by their light; she knew him; she had no fear of him. "I see Marie accumulating rubbish, if not worse; disfiguring herself with it. I see you living by laws and beautiful traditions, sane, fresh, simple." That was what he said to her.

Her eyelids almost covered her eyes. Her breath came in short little pants. She felt as though she had paused in her swift rush to him and now hung folded and throbbing, awaiting his descent on her. It was as if she awaited dissolution so profoundly she figured her union with him as a loss of separate personality, a kind of mystic diffusion of her spirit through his, making them for ever indivisible.

Bitter and chagrined Marie's voice sounded. "Oh, I don't agree with you at all. I agree with Jimmy. You're getting deplorably dull. If you go on like this you'll be too uninteresting to be borne. Orthodox things are terrible, I think. You're merely being bamboozled by superficialities. Shams! Conventional morality! It's the most ghastly thing there is. Mid-Victorian hypocrisy! You're a pathetic spectacle, Hob."

She laughed. In a firm, authoritative voice she added, "How do you like your diggings?"

Hob accepted the change of subject. "I'm charmed. The daughter told me all about bee-keeping yesterday, and concluded with a recital of 'How doth the little busy bee . . . ?'"

Marie looked at Dido. "What a pity you aren't brainy, Miss Baird!" she said. "With all your leisure you could

write a novel. I'm sure our villagers would afford splendid copy."

It was Hilda who retaliated, without finesse, in a sharp, slightly trembling voice. "I wonder you don't do one yourself, as you can do so many things."

Marie opened her glistening eyes. She was surprised, and, for the instant, arrested.

"Yes, why don't you?" Hob took up the suggestion. "Write your experiences and Miss Bessant's. This week's best seller 'My Life,' by M. Jesson."

He smiled with his lips, keeping his large, frigid eyes on Marie.

They were now all angered. They scarcely troubled to conceal their anger. The silence was tense with their emotions.

Then Marie turned away, seeming to disengage herself from crudities, from vulgarities.

"Come and pick apples for me, Jimmy," she said, not even looking at him in the fine certitude of his obedience.

Slowly, with decisive movements which showed the shape of her limbs under her thin dress, shaking her flat, moist head, she walked up the path. She turned her head from side to side, scrutinizing the flowers with a tranquil and happy air.

Jimmy followed.

With their departure a change came over Hob. He ceased to be composed and explanatory. He leant against one of the verandah supports and looked with a bright fixity at the ground.

"Have you been reading up psychic-analysis?" Dido

asked. "You said 'complexes' with an air of experiences."

"Reviews," Hob explained, "I've been studying the reviews on the subject. I do like to seem well-informed."

He looked softly and timidly at her.

She laughed. "Is it much of a strain? You needn't keep it up if it is. Hilda and I have been cooking, so we're feeling very mundane. We haven't cleared our heads of so much lard to so much flour yet."

"These domestic troubles," he murmured, with a sympathetic and initiated air. "I'm sorry for you."

"There's some flour on your hair now, Dido," Hilda said.

They all laughed. Hob and Dido looked at each other.

Hilda's good, clear gaze rested on them. She stood up.

"I must go and wait at the gate for the carrier," she said. "Shall I ask him to get half a pound or a pound?"

"Half a pound." Dido explained to Hob the value of the carrier.

"Horsham," Hob repeated. "I've never been there. And this fellow takes passengers? How jolly to go. Will you take this little boy to Horsham, Miss Baird? If you've made no other arrangements for to-day."

He waited for her answer, his gaze downcast, his lips anxiously smiling.

Dido laughed, showing her little clenched teeth. In her joy she looked neither at him nor at Hilda. She sat, without answering, tender and inscrutable.

"Will you?" Hob said again, his face growing dark with uneasiness.

Dido stood up. She gave him her gleaming, calm smile.

"It will be awfully jolly," she said. "He has a beautiful car—pneumatic tires, you know."

"Perhaps Mr. Ramsay will stand at the gate and look for him while you change," Hilda suggested.

There were joyous instructions, acceptances, Hob's departure. Then Hilda and Dido were alone. From the other end of the garden Marie watched them.

Appealingly Dido looked at Hilda.

Hilda's mild gaze did not waver. "I think he's awfully nice," Hilda said—"nice enough even for you, Dido. I told you he was certain to admire you."

Dido stared at a pearl button on Hilda's blouse. She noticed the straightness of Hilda's hips. She saw Hilda through bright visions of Hob—his head, his smile, his long cheeks. These visions, circumscribing her, seemed to confine her to a strange enchanted zone of solitude with Hob. Hilda stood outside it. Hilda—outside! *Hilda.*

Vehemently she broke through that insidious barrier of memory. With an odd little sound she threw her arms round Hilda's waist, pressing her cheek on Hilda's arched small head.

A moment later she released Hilda. Mistily they looked at each other. Then silent, taking swift, almost manly strides, they went into the house.

CHAPTER VII

ON HIRST HILL

I

MARIE went out to dinner that night.

The house, after she had gone, seemed very quiet. Mrs. Jesson had dinner early and then went into the garden.

Seeing Hilda sitting alone, crocheting, she walked over to her.

"You're alone to-night," she said, smiling.

"Yes. My cousin's gone to Horsham with Mr. Ramsay, in the carrier's car. I dare say they'll be back soon."

Silently Mrs. Jesson's brain repeated this information. She looked round her vaguely. Then she shivered a little. An inaudible sigh came through her parted lips. She had a moment of moral prostration before the inexorable decrees of destiny. Dido had gone with Hob. Her despairing, oblique appeal to Dido had failed.

She put out her hand and grasped an apple-bough near her.

Presently she said: "Oh, yes. Marie's gone out to dinner. The house seems very quiet."

"And she's going to Hirst Hill afterwards, isn't she?" Hilda said.

"Eh?" Mrs. Jesson brought out loudly.

"Isn't she going to Hirst Hill? I heard her making the arrangement with Mr. Ainger. He said he and Mr.

Lucas would take her. I thought it was for to-night. But if she didn't tell you . . ."

Hilda's voice thinned away.

"Mr. Ainger and Mr. Lucas," Mrs. Jesson echoed. "She said nothing about it to me."

Hilda gazed amiably at her. After a long, blind stare at Hilda she turned and went towards the house.

She looked straight at its windows, but she did not see them. Her dress caught on trailing pieces of rose, and she jerked it free with a fierce unconscious movement. She was shaken by anger and by dread. She moved with her gaze fixed on appalling possibilities. Before she had taken many irregular and stumbling steps thoughts gathered in her mind.

"I don't like her going with those men. Why didn't she tell me she was going? It gets dark early now. I wish she hadn't gone."

She halted and looked round her. Her fingers plucked at her palms.

"I don't like Jimmy," she said aloud. "I don't like her being with those men up there. . . . She never tells me what she's going to do. She ought to tell me."

Her stare at the swarthy angle of the Green visible across the hedge became incredulous. To her her position seemed terrible. She couldn't believe in its reality. Her rejection by Marie was, in its completeness, in its finality, inhuman. For one dark moment, wherein she descended into the profound abyss of utter desolation, she saw Marie as monstrous in her inflexible repudiation of all her mother's claims to intimacy, to obedience, to confidence.

"I don't know how she can treat me so," she said, still uttering her words aloud. "She's—hard—and selfish. . . ."

She turned and moved rapidly on, screwing up her eyes, and then opening them wide again in extreme nervous agitation.

"I dare say I'm hard. I expect too much. I'm selfish. I want her all for myself. I'm jealous of every one she goes with. I make all my unhappiness through my own jealous—unreasonable—love. I'm unreasonable. . . . But I don't like her going with those men. I don't want her to have anything to do with Jimmy. He's too old—and he's worldly. I don't know how much dirt he's been through. He's always with Tommy."

Again she stopped. Her little somber eyes slid round in a hopeless and bewildered stare. She became quite rigid with fear. She gazed at a mental picture of Marie deliberately, through suffering and disappointment, abandoning herself to this new morality of free love, this morality which made natural instinct the only law, this dry materialism and skepticism.

Involuntarily she raised her hands, the veined, thick fingers extended, curled, as though she would grasp Marie, holding her, preserving her, in an unmovable embrace.

She glared round at the dim golden films of sunlight wherein the garden, the Green, the faint hills, lay odorous and still. Physically Marie was beyond her reach. Spiritually she was almost lost sight of, moving away, and with every withdrawing movement, growing more diminutive, more bafflingly immobile and without sound.

Instantly this perception was succeeded by another which

falsified it, which brought Mrs. Jesson's head up with a look of grand and unfailing omniscience. Marie would never pass beyond the radius of her mother's vision. There was no realm of darkness, strangeness, and corruption which she might enter but she would be visible to her mother, followed unerringly, small, far-off, detached, but always known, always transparent, always audible. Why did she say she didn't understand Marie? There was nothing in Marie's nature that was hidden from her. Marie was her child. Only by death could Marie escape her. Living, her farthest flights could not obscure nor hide her. The music of her actions, the feverish complexity of her emotions, her passage through day and through night—all would be known to her mother. Nothing could attenuate the power of that sublime and tragical vision.

She moved slowly across the lawn. She felt numbed and bowed down by apprehension. Marie was suffering; she loved Hob and she had seen him going off with Miss Baird; she knew that her love was hopeless, and in her pain—she was so impulsive, so rebellious—she agreed to Jimmy's suggestion.

"She don't want to have time to think. She'll move all the time, doing anything that occurs to her so that she'll forget. She's desperate. I wish—when she's unhappy—when she's suffered any disappointment—she'd come to me. But she never has. I know she never will. She'll go to anybody but me, because she thinks I'm a drag on her—she's afraid I shall try to direct her, and she wants to go her own way. . . . Jimmy loves her. But she mustn't have him. I couldn't bear her to have him."

She stepped on to the verandah, and without knowing what she was doing, smoothed the traveling-rug which covered Marie's bed, touched the box of chocolates on the table, picked up an apple core which lay beside the box and threw it into a clump of phlox. Then she stood still, her hands hanging at her sides, her eyes fixed on the irradiated gauzes of light woven by the sun across the damp air.

"Jimmy isn't good enough for her. If I went round to Mrs. Bennett's . . . No, I mustn't do that. She'd be angry at my intervention. I couldn't say anything before Mrs. Bennett. They'll go across the fields. If I met them I could go with them. She'd be angry, but . . . I don't like her being alone with those men. I can't rest here. If she has Jimmy it will break my heart."

She turned towards the drawing-room. Marie would never forgive her if she intervened. She saw herself approaching the group; Marie's severe, sparkling glance sank down into her, mystically wounding her; she saw Jimmy's large, meaningless brow, upright hair, and wide nostrils, his short, fat legs and wooden little movements; she saw Tommy's sleek oval head, and peering glances; and, bulging above the three figures, the black hill, the rusty sky. She couldn't stop here; she disliked, she distrusted those men. She would never have had Tommy in the house only every one else did; one had to overlook so much nowadays. There wasn't, nevertheless, a mother at Rowe Green who would like her daughter to be out with Tommy at twilight in solitary places. And Jimmy's presence was no comfort. That his intentions were honorable made him scarcely less to be dreaded.

“He isn’t clever; he’s only a farmer; he—he—there’s nothing fine about him. She ought to have some one good and fine—an important man. I didn’t mind Mr. Ramsay not being a genius, because I liked him for his character so. But Jimmy isn’t anything you can respect; he hasn’t any personality. . . . I can’t sit here and let him try and win her. I’m afraid what she’ll do while she’s like this; reckless, and suffering. . . . She’ll be angry. . . . Shall I do more harm than good? How weak we are! We have to move in darkness. If I could only see a step ahead. ‘I do not ask to see the distant scene, one step enough for me.’ ”

She went into the drawing-room. Her mouth was dry and her eyelids felt hot and smarting. A vast solitude seemed to surround her, and she could discern a signal of help, a promise of succor. The room, the house, the gleaming land appeared to affirm their irresponsibility with an ironic emphasis. A murmur of voices in the kitchen sounded in another world. In the dining-room there was a faint chink of china: Bessie was having a cup of tea. She had a sudden passionate impulse to go to Bessie.

She seemed to see Bessie disengaging herself from her haunted and abnormal realm and incompetently shrinking from the immortal terrors which preyed upon Mrs. Jesson.

Quickly she opened the door and went upstairs to her bedroom.

II

She gazed round it with a stupid look. Boots—she must change her house shoes.

She did so, pulling at the laces with impatience and irritation. Then she stood up. She couldn't trouble to change her dress. She'd wear her silk coat. It didn't matter if it wasn't suitable—no one would look at an old woman.

She slipped the black silk coat over her gray dress. Without a glance at the glass, she settled on her head a large black silk sailor hat encircled with a gray feather. Then she picked up gloves and went out.

In the hall she took an umbrella—the first she saw—from the tubular blue stand. Her silk skirts swishing, the laces of her boots tapping the boots with a sharp, small noise, she emerged into the road and vigorously, with angular, abrupt movements, using the umbrella as a stick, walked down the Coltham road.

It was now half-past seven. Mrs. Bennett usually had dinner at half-past six. Marie had, possibly, left at seven; but it was also possible that she had not yet started.

There was no sun in the lane nor on this part of the Green. The trodden grass-track she followed was spongy and black; the clumps of reeds stood up stiff and morose amid the soft, moist diffusion of tall feathery grass-heads. On her left, embedded in dark trees marked here and there with a blue slat of sky, amid straying rank scents of earth and weed and pool, was the little Norman church; on her right, above a wet smother of grass, braken, and blackberries hung with rags of dead leaves and stems, the pines stood molded in swart and slender grace. Before her the yellow road wound, casting a sickly light.

She walked quickly. She was without thought, but con-

scious of formless, moody shapes which flitted across the darkness of her mind. She looked at the few people she met, with a concentrated expression, endeavoring to realize their reality, to make of them something more than moving shadows amid the unmoving presences of the land. She became, gradually, more perceptive. Her glance unconsciously appealed and questioned. Faces advanced softly to her with mystery and yet with a touching candor, and, frowning in her earnestness, she searched veiled, unfathomable eyes, hollow cheeks, the bitter or sarcastic or patient curves of lip.

There was no reticence in her gaze. She looked at them with a kind simplicity and they looked back at her flowing coat, her elaborate dress, her hat, which had fallen a little to the back of her head, her big boots, glistening with moisture from the grass.

She wondered about these people. She would have liked to speak to them. It was the first walk she had taken since her return, and despite her timid and perturbed mood she enjoyed the sweet sense of companionship, of release from that feeling of singularity in suffering, until she remembered how inaccessible they were, these human beings who passed within reach of her hand.

“We mustn’t do anything that’s kind and homely and natural,” she reflected. “There’s always some social convention to be remembered. They’re not in my class, or if they are it’s not good form to talk about personal things; there’s always something to stop any—any communication with our fellow-creatures. Besides the barriers we can feel ourselves. I’ve lived here thirty years and I’ve no real

friend, no one I can talk to. English people are so stiff. I think the Scotch are more like Americans."

When she crossed the little bridge, catching between the dipping boughs and nooks of thick, wet undergrowth, the brown, polished glimmer of water, shallow, passed over by singing insects, breathing out a mildewed and death-like smell, she ceased to meet people; the lane went, narrowing and empty, before her, fields sweeping off from it and swelling up to a clear rolled edge along the luminous and filmy sky.

She passed a farm and then for some way high hedges and firs concealed the view. Young oak leaves, haggard with blight, spotted the tops of the hedges, and from the sides of ditches glossy leaves came out, wanly glimmering like eyes.

Several times she stopped and looked round, but there were no figures on the road. She reached the stile at last and, after a troublous glance backward at that empty perspective, got over it and went forward into the furrowed, oozing, and yielding muddiness of the field.

She lifted her skirts high above her boots.

"I hope she brought a change of shoes. They would go this way, I suppose, not by the road."

In her perplexity she stopped. Before her the field, fawn-colored with stubble, slanted down to a hedgerow. Beyond it and the succeeding wedges of grassland, fallowland, and potatoes, Hirst Hill brooded, one sleek side showing, and a shaggy mane. No human moved on the flats nor on that dark hump thinly veiled in a yellow fog of sunlight. She heard no sound but the stealthy sucking of the earth

at the water she squeezed out with her boots; the strong, sodden earth puffed towards her its tart, its resinous, its sickly scents with the suggestion of a rotting and depopulated world.

A feeling of shame oppressed her. There seemed in her action something melodramatic and crude. She felt terribly that when she marched upon Marie, grotesque in her finery, her muddy boots, her heat, and agitation, Marie would be furious. She asked herself what she would say to explain her intrusion, and her brain settled into a stupor at the mere thought of speaking under the brilliant, fixed regard of Marie's eyes. She voicelessly declared that she could not go on; she was becoming quite reasonless and wild with her love and her terrors; she trembled with fright, thinking that Marie might come up to the stile from the road and discover her here. It seemed to her that she would not be able to bear Marie's amazement, the courteous discretion of the men. She made an abrupt, angry gesture, repelling the thought that they should gaze upon her passion, should criticize the manner in which she expressed that passion.

"I oughtn't to have come. She'll be so angry, I'd better go back. I must remember she isn't a child that I can follow and—and dominate. Why can't I trust her? She says I don't trust her."

She stared at those soft scoops of field, holding the light and the mist between the severe rounded strokes of the woodlands and the masses of the three hills. She found herself unable to move. She dared not go forward; she could not go back. She felt irritated by her invidious posi-

tion. She resented something without knowing what it was she resented: Marie's attitude towards her, the tyranny of her love for Marie, or the rigors of human life.

Then diminutive amid the large forms of nature, two forms moved out beyond one of the distant hedgerows; tiny, sharp, pliant things, they seemed to glide over the ribbed brown field.

They were the figures of a woman and a man, and she knew beyond doubt that the woman was Marie; the man she could not recognize. But the small hat and the pale dress, the firm, manly movements with the walking-stick—that was Marie.

She no longer hesitated. She forgot the aspects and the effects of her action. She rapidly continued to cross the field, taking long strides, her skirt gathered up in a bunch in one hand, the umbrella striking against stones, sinking into the thick ruts, swinging forward and descending without a tremor, her eyes, full of rage, fixed on the masculine figure which opened out and grew straight again in odd, futile gesticulation.

She did not think what she would say when she reached them; she did not consider how far from them she was, nor how, long before she came near them, they, if they turned, would see and recognize her. She thought of nothing; she was driven on by powers stronger than reason, or pride, or fear for self—the power of her hatred of that unnamed man; of her unconquerable belief in the approach of some climax, ruinous and irremediable, which her presence might not avert, but which her absence would precipitate.

III

It was two miles to the top of Hirst Hill. Marie and her companion were walking quickly, and when Mrs. Jesson came out into the last of the fields they were ascending the hillside, their look of futility, of unconscious sadness, emphasized now as they toiled up the dark, wild spaces of burnt gorse and heather, over deep mats of needles and mildewed cones, past solitary pines jutting up with a swarthy and torn air, the half-moon of the Weald below and the paling flat vacuity of the sky above.

The sun was dulling now as it dropped into the fogs, but the rays from its upper half flushed Brend Hill and edged the pines above Hirstwood with a semblance of golden fur. The deep quietude enveloped her; all things reposed; only those two figures moved on the whole visible expanse between sky and sky.

A feeling of despair overcame her. Again she felt how terrible her position was; she trembled as though she had been mortally injured; she suffered from a vague sensation of shame and indignity. She did not want any one to pass and see her here, but her anger and pain sprang from no perception of her dramatic aspect in muddy boots, silk clothes, and disarranged hat; she had no thought of her physical state; it was in her state as mother alone that she perceived herself. She was careless of her appearance as a woman; she would, without thought, subject that appearance to all kinds of trials and disasters, but as a mother she was invested with a sublime dignity, and, tramping over the strip of glass beside the lumps of rich glistening earth,

gazing at those figures, awaiting stoically the moment of impact, of storm, she bent morally before an impious affront, she shuddered with her whole body, seeing herself discarded, disdained, abused.

The moment of recognition came at last. Marie stopped and turned to gaze at the South Downs, pointing with her stick to Chanctonbury Ring, to Shoreham Gap, moving the stick along, and then lowering it and bending her gaze on the Weald, on Rowe Green pond, on the little precise angles of tilled land. She became suddenly still and intent.

Involuntarily Mrs. Jesson stopped. She lifted her head as if courageously and simply baring herself to that steady, far-off stare. She forgot the distance between them and smiled with stiff, shapeless lip. Her heart began to hammer against her side, a film passed over her eyes. She wished she hadn't come; she saw this impetuous and absurd action from Marie's standpoint and condemned herself without pity. She waited as if lightning, as if devastating forces, would leap from that motionless small figure arrested in its graceful joyousness on the dun sweep of hill, reared up behind, scarred and unheeding.

After a moment she began to move again. She did not dare to signal to Marie. She was now filled with apprehension lest Marie should ignore her and continue the ascent; then she thought how dreadful it would be if Marie waited there; she felt she could not go on; now, because of Marie, she realized her physical aspect. She gnawed at her lips, convulsively she fingered the handle of her umbrella, and still she went on, indomitable under all her fears and regrets.

Marie turned to her companion, gracefully expressive

with her arms and head. Mrs. Jesson saw the little blank white round of the man's face directed towards the field. Then Marie began to descend the hill alone, the man resumed the ascent. Swift, and light, and unreadable, Marie moved to her mother.

IV

Something compelled Mrs. Jesson to go forward again. She reached the end of the field just as Marie paused on the track about a dozen feet above the road. Mrs. Jesson crossed the road. She looked up at Marie.

"Come up here," Marie said in a clear, low voice. She folded her hands on the top of her walking-stick; her sarcastic, bright gaze rested on her mother.

Looking at the track, Mrs. Jesson climbed the steep but short piece of ground and stopped before Marie. She then raised her eyes. A shiver passed over her and she said in a hoarse and unnatural voice:

"Marie . . ." She did not go on. "If she loved me she couldn't look at me like that," she thought, "but I ought not to have come."

With one fat, gloveless hand hanging in front of her, the other stirring on the umbrella handle, her head a little tilted back, she silently gazed at Marie.

Marie's face, white with powder, swollen, and calm, had no expression; in their swollen sockets her eyes, darkened by the shade of a black lace hat, burnt somberly; her mouth, open slightly, looked sharp-edged and bitter.

Slowly she turned and glanced back up the track, mov-

ing her broad shoulders and neck gracefully and with an effect of power. "Get on to the grass," she said. "Some one may want to pass here. The *grass*, not the bracken. Everything's dripping. But I see you have boots."

Mrs. Jesson faced her from a damp tangle of whortleberry bushes and grass. As she met Marie's smile she repressed a moan and an impulse to wring her hands. Unable to bear that piercing, slow, ironical smile, she looked away at the Sussex distances, filling with mist and dusk.

"Now perhaps you'll explain why in the world you came here in clothes suitable for a garden-party, boots, and with Miss Baird's umbrella."

Mrs. Jesson threw a distracted and wondering look at the umbrella, but began to speak at once, forgetting what Marie had said, disregarding even the expressive stare of those now unsmiling eyes.

"Marie, why didn't you tell me you were coming up here? Who is that with you? It will be dark soon. I don't think you ought to be up here when it's dark, darling. . . ."

"Good Lord, good Lord," Marie cried, sweeping the point of the stick over the ground, "are you quite mad? Oh, *mother*, I wish you'd try and not do such preposterous things. I can't understand how you can be such a fool." She fixed the stick in the ground again, and looked at her mother in a kind of icy rage.

"Marie, I had to come. I knew you'd be angry, but—I had to come. It worries me so—thinking of you—with those men. Is it Jimmy or . . . ?"

Angrily Marie burst out laughing; she stared downward, speaking with irritable gestures and in a vibrating voice.

"Really, you are too melodramatic. To chase after me in those clothes and with a demented air because I go out with a man! Good heavens, do you imagine it's the nineteenth century? How did you find out I was coming here?"

"Miss Nicholls told me. You only see the absurd side, Marie, but if ever you're a mother . . ."

"A mother!" Again she laughed, walking backwards and forwards, her eyes glittering, her face coarsened and exasperated. "The chances of my ever becoming a mother are likely to be small if you rush to wrest me away from every man you see me with. This is the crowning act of your idiocy; positively it is idiocy. Have you *no* regard for appearances? I'm sorry to have to speak so strongly to you, but you don't seem to have the slightest glimmerings of common-sense. How do you think I am to explain this escapade to Jimmy? . . ."

"Is it Jimmy you're with?"

"Yes, yes, yes." She paused, frowning, biting her lips. "Why are you so absurd? You've only developed this craze of haunting me lately. If I were a child in my 'teens it would be more reasonable, but there's no reason for this *continual*, this frantic, suspicion. It makes us both ridiculous. What am I to say to Jimmy? That the kitchen flue has caught fire or that Bessie has eloped? He would find neither reason wilder than the truth that, in your conventional Christian morality, you can't trust your daughter out after dark with a man, but must come and play bodkin. If they're the kind of thoughts your religious sense gives you, thank God I'm a pagan."

She laughed. Then she became silent, examining the

knob of the stick, compressing her lips, her face growing old and dark.

For a moment Mrs. Jesson, too, was silent. She sighed deeply, half closing her eyes. When she spoke she did not look at Marie; she looked before her and spoke in a low unmusical voice.

“Marie, I’ve always let you have your own way. We’re not like each other; we can only be happy together by one of us giving way to the other. I’ve always given way. I’ve given you everything you wanted.” Her utterance grew more rapid; she blinked her eyes as if the dim bloom of the sky was too rich, too lovely, to be borne. “It makes me so unhappy that there should always be this—this friction between us. . . .”

“But there needn’t be,” Marie cried, looking half angrily, half pityingly at her mother. “Good heavens, I long to live at peace with you, but you have such an extraordinary capacity for making scenes. Now be a sensible woman and go back and lie down. I know it’s your love that makes you fuss over me so.” She laughed good-humoredly.

Mrs. Jesson gave her a strange, almost majestic look. Taller than Marie and with an air of severe, tortured resolution, there was something commanding, something spacious, about her. Marie rapped the stick peevishly against her shoe.

“I can’t go back, Marie, and leave you here with Jimmy. I don’t like him. Why didn’t Tommy come? Miss Nicholls heard him say . . .”

“Oh, this is all too ridiculous. I can’t imagine what you’ve worked yourself up into. Jimmy didn’t ask Tommy.

I suppose he preferred a *tête-à-tête*." She laughed. "Make an effort, do, and be sensible. You won't leave me here with Jimmy! This is farcical."

"You don't understand, Marie, how everything you do makes up my life. You are my life. I've no life apart from you." Her voice vibrated, she made a sudden passionate movement with her hands; when Marie stepped back as if she would fly from those hands, that passion, an awful shudder passed over her, but she went on speaking, forcing her words out between distorted lips. "Marie, I would rather see you in your grave than—than—that certain things should happen to you. Come back with me now, darling. I've done everything for you; do this for me. I don't like Jimmy. I can't leave you with him. Try and understand what I feel. Marie . . ."

She made inarticulate sounds in her throat and then became silent. She trembled, and waves of darkness rose before her eyes; her thoughts were in chaos; she did not know what she wanted to say nor what the action was that she feverishly desired to do; she felt suffocated by some pressure; it seemed to her that she strove against iron bonds. She heard Marie speaking as she might have heard the voice of some one in flight, faint and diminishing.

"There's nothing to be gained by talking like this," Marie said. "You're upset. I haven't the least idea what you mean. Go back and for goodness' sake lie down. To talk like this about Jimmy is preposterous. You must try and see things as they are, mother. All your views are theoretical; you're as ignorant of life as a child, and you raise bogies because people don't live by the extraordinary

jumble of conventions and platitudes which you call life. Matthew Arnold, and Mrs. Hemans, and Eliza Cook! Good Lord, it's too funny."

"Oh, Marie, it's what you call life that frightens me so."

With a fierce gesture she threw the umbrella from her; she stepped swiftly to Marie, her quivering hands seeking Marie's beloved body. Alarmed and furious, Marie retreated, her own hands making silencing and vehement movements.

"Marie, what does it matter what people think? I know what you mean, but don't think of trifles when you see I'm concerned with your happiness. There's no one about, and if there were"—she cast a savage look round—"they would sympathize with me. I can't always be thinking about appearances. I only care for you—for your safety—and happiness. Marie, come back with me now, dear. Can't you see that I'm suffering? Don't let us quarrel like this. Marie, don't evade me."

She saw Marie still retreating, looking round her with disquietude, blackly frowning; she heard Marie's sharp, low sentences, and she felt terribly her own impotence. Her fears flocked about her like wolves; she pressed her doubled fist on her hair and pushed it up from her brow as if everything which touched her was exasperating in her powerlessness to grasp and crush against her that strong, inimical face and body. Her defeat seemed inevitable, and she cried out in a loud, harsh voice under the stress of that impression of Marie's distance from her:

"Marie, I don't want you to go with Jimmy. You can't expect me to stand aside and see you dealing with your life

yourself. I'm old. I can see where happiness lies. Be guided by me, by my experience, Marie. He isn't good enough. You must marry some one fine—finer."

Now luminously she saw her desire. "Let's go back to America, darling. Why should we stay here? It's never been home to me. And there's no one good enough for you in this little village. You won't meet any one here of any—any character, personality. Let's go back, darling. . . . You know, Marie, I want to see you married, but not to Jimmy, and I can't bear to see that man Lucas near you. Come home with me now and let's leave here altogether and go back to America. This is like exile. Over there, we're with our own people. . . . Do try and understand, darling."

She was holding Marie's arm now; she uttered the last words with a rough and hopeless intonation, pressing the soft arm, staring at that gloomy and drooping face.

Marie's silence crushed her; she felt herself broken. Her nostrils opened quiveringly and tears filled her eyes. Her hand fell from Marie's arm and lay stiff and outspread against her skirt. She drew her breath in short, difficult gasps; she could not see the country nor Marie for her tears, but she felt the presence of both—the dusk-washed solitudes, the eternal inhumanity of the hills, and that motionless, calm figure which was hers and which was not hers, which was indissolubly linked with her and which yet denied and made futile the union.

"Oh, Marie, you're so hard," she muttered, fumbling for her handkerchief, weeping with an almost childish abandon.

Her own words seemed terrible to her. She winced, moving her body as though she wished to hide, to diminish, herself. Marie's shouts and angry gestures affrighted her less than this somber immobility, this downcast stare. She felt as if she were guilty towards Marie. She wanted to apologize and humble herself; as she squeezed the handkerchief against her eyes she thought:

"I can't be a good mother. I can't. If I were I should know how to manage her, how to avoid these scenes. I do everything wrong. O God, let her say something that'll show she loves me."

She dared not speak; she felt that whatever sentence fell on her from those bitter and sunken lips would be merited. She was a senseless and wicked woman.

Marie spoke in a quiet voice, looking seriously at her mother.

"You see, we don't understand each other. Because I act by reason and not by sentiment, and because I'm not a hypocrite, you think I'm hard. Do turn your back on the road if you can't stop crying. I can't imagine what any one passing will think. You're so difficult to argue with. You say you want me to be happy, and yet you continually raise questions which are utterly without sense and which I can't possibly, as a sane person, do other than disregard, and then what you call my brutality upsets you. You make it impossible for us to be happy together, mother. I don't doubt for an instant that you do everything out of love for me, but I say that your kind of love isn't a virtue at all; it's a vice. It worries me and makes more trouble for me than a good, selfish indifference would. If you ever

suggested any sensible course I should be ready to take it, but you never do. You can go back to America if you're not happy here, but I shan't come. To think we must everlastingly be tied to each other is absurd. Now go home and rest. I dare say you'll have a rabid head after this. Jimmy will wonder what in the world has become of me. I absolutely can't stop another minute."

She turned and stepped back on to the path, her gleaming, animated gaze searching for Jimmy amid the obscurities of the hill. "Do try and look as sane as possible," she said. "You've *got* to live," she stamped her foot, "with a regard for appearance whether you like it or not. You'll be run in as a blind-o if you're not careful."

Mrs. Jesson came rustling to her through the thick bracken and whortleberries. "Marie, is it nothing to you what I say? Don't go with him to-night!"

"Oh, good Lord, are you going to start it all over again! Pull that hat on straight, and button the coat up. And you've left Miss Baird's broolly in the bushes. Those boots! They look *ghastly*. How you could do such a mad thing I can't imagine."

She dragged the coat together. Mrs. Jesson caught her wrists. "Marie, come back with me. It's nearly dark now. Listen to me—the coat don't matter. I'm your mother, Marie."

Marie twisted herself free. "Good Lord, as if any one else would treat me so!" she shouted. "Don't forget that broolly. And—go—home." She ran up the path.

Mrs. Jesson took a few stumbling steps in pursuit. "Marie—Marie. You're going with that man?"

“Yes, yes, yes!” She continued to run; then suddenly she stopped; she turned her pale, furious face to her mother. “Go home,” she said, her voice low and distinct. “Try and imagine what kind of effect your appearance will have on the village, and for my sake, to show your great love for me; act like a sane person. Now go back at once.”

She continued the ascent.

Mrs. Jesson could not control herself. Her despair was so dreadful that she tried to deny the reality of the scene. She saw Marie going, full of rage and profoundly immutable, strengthened, not weakened, in her intentions. She hadn't touched Marie; the effects of her love, not the love itself—Marie saw only these. She felt that she had been with Marie but a few minutes; she had said nothing. For the first time she realized the supreme wild hopefulness which unconsciously had upheld her in her progress here. And the reality—the frustration, the rejection—the terrible reality of her powerlessness over Marie, her meaninglessness to Marie—crushed her.

“Marie,” she called.

She thought how beautiful Marie was, how she loved her. She pulled her dress away from her neck. “Marie—darling—I hate that man. *Marie!*”

She shouted the name.

Marie turned and made a gesture of stormy warning. She waved her hand towards the village. Half closed and black, her eyes seemed to burn with exasperation. She again turned and went on.

Mrs. Jesson tore the lace on her dress. Her teeth chattered; she was no longer crying, but she could scarcely

see the hill; she saw nothing but Marie's figure passing upward towards a shining vapor which rolled above her like a smoke. She had a moment of strange hallucinations wherein she forgot Jimmy and why she had come there, and felt only as if an endless separation had taken place between herself and Marie; as if Death had claimed Marie; she forgot even that she would see Marie again.

She mumbled between her dry lips, "O God, why do you let me suffer so!"

Then her senses returned to her. The nakedness of the hill and the sky, the familiar reiteration of the stages of night's approach, the actual significance of Marie's retreat, were all perceived. She shivered. She felt awfully that Marie would have Jimmy, that she would have whatever position in life she wanted. She was not to be guided, she was not to be protected. She mounted that hill, a menacing and resolute figure swayed by unthinkable beliefs, by frightful intentions.

"O God, guide her," she moaned. "I can't bear this. I can't."

She made a step as though she would mount the hill. Then she stood stiff again, only her hands pulling at each other. She dared not follow Marie. There was nothing she could do. She rolled her eyes, her face haggard and aged in the faint religious light which fell, gentle as a perfume, from the flushing sky. She became incredulous. That walk, those hopes, that deep passion—and no end but this. She dragged her hands from each other violently and turned and took a few irregular steps downward. Then she remembered Marie's instructions. She went for the umbrella, angrily

pushing through the bracken, feeling the cold drops breaking on her hands, and the sod lapsing from her foot. She grasped the umbrella and remembered that it was Miss Baird's. She held it with a nervous strength as though she would crumble it between her fingers. The impulse to fling it from her was irresistible. She did restrain herself. Stabbing the earth with it she returned to the track, and then, as she again began the descent, other recollections came to her.

She pulled her hat more over her brow, she buttoned her coat, she looked down with a vague, frightened expression at her boots.

Her desolation became apparent to her in all its sorrowfulness. Marie thought of her only as an unfortunate visible encumbrance which must be prevented from becoming a disgrace. Her soul, her heart, were unseen by Marie, were contemptuously ignored.

She cast a look of horror at the gathering darkness, seeing the southward distances fading into the smudge of mist and night, and the evenly nibbled edge of Brend Hill black against the smoky glows of the west which burnt down into dusk, into dullness, even as she gazed.

The silence, the sure, serene, unalterable actions of the scene appalled her. Tears filled her eyes. She went down the track, stumbling over stones and into abrupt dips, slipping on sticky inclines, assisting herself with the umbrella without losing ever that ferocious sense of it as hateful, as meriting ruin.

With movement her agitation increased. She became tortured by the thought that she was leaving Marie. Fright-

ful scenes passed through her mind. She felt as if she were screaming aloud and almost wondered over the large silence which brimmed the circle of land between the converging skies. Her thoughts were like flames which flickered in an immense darkness and revealed abysses of evil and pain. She crossed the road and strode without caution, without perception, into the rutted shadowiness of the field track, and all the time she thought she had brought Marie up for this; she had loved her, tended her, sacrificed to her, hoped, planned, striven, and this was the end.

She hated Jimmy. She could not, at this moment, act or think with either reason or justice. He had become monstrous to her. She hurried along the track, pieces of brier and hawthorn catching her sleeve, and releasing her, fresh airs, smelling of mist, of blackberries, of bonfire smokes, of the deep, mysterious, wet core of the hedge, puffing stealthily towards her, the hedge seeming to stretch before her taut and sharp, the fields lying round her emitting their dim, holy light, the sky revolving over her, silent and without ripple but never still, roots starting up before her, and lean branches, and strewings or piles of weed cut from the hedges—she hurried along and she saw only the hill and Marie and that man for whom Marie was leaving her.

She said many times, "O God, don't let her do any of these dreadful things." She thought: "She is good, but things are so different now. She don't consider wicked what seems terrible to me."

She passed into long ages of contemplation of Jimmy, remembering her past visions of Marie's potential husband.

The memory of those reveries, those joyous forecasts, made her cry out.

“Mother and suffering,” she said, “the terms are synonymous. The greatest happiness, the greatest pain.”

She had longed for Marie’s marriage. Marriage! She thought of May Bessant, and stood still, staring with suffering eyes at the pure, delicate contours of the woods ahead. She must go back to Marie. She saw the threatening resolution on Marie’s face, and went on, past those interminable straight markings of furrows or crops, past the sweeps of stubble, soft and blurred in the distance, but sticking up close by like teeth, bitter and keen. A feeling of intense dislike for these fields, these grave rises, began to burn in her. She had a dim feeling of their perfection and calm, and she saw, therefore, more tragically, her own gloom and faults, the gloom, the fault, the mystery, of all human life. She became full of pessimism.

She was walking very rapidly. The fields seemed without end. There was not a stir nor a movement within sight, nor in the heart of that rolling darkness. She scarcely remembered that she had a purpose; she seemed only to hear Marie’s command “Go . . .” and she moved as if she were under a spell, as if she were condemned to everlasting movement. All her thoughts and visions at last gathered into the one numbing thought of eviction; she heard Marie driving her away; she fled, her soul frozen in protest.

So at last she came to the stile beyond which lay the Coltham road. She got over the stile, tearing her hands on some hawthorn needles which evilly rested on the top bar of wood. She cast a dazed look round her and saw a few

large yellow stars poised in the wash of green above the sharp black fir-tips. They seemed to communicate something to her. She stood still, vaguely staring, while she wondered.

Then the mental torpor into which she had sunk was destroyed. Night, darkness, solitude. She made a sound in her throat as the message seemed voluminously to roll upon her, burying her heart. She was no longer wild and emotional. A kind of fatalism settled upon her as she walked down the road. She thought that she looked on life as it was; modern life, neurotic, sensuous, destructive. She told herself that Marie was entering upon this life and the knowledge drew from her no more than a faint tremor through all her being.

She became aware that she was tired; alone of her distorted feelings, her dislike of the country remained. Thinking of Hirst Hill she unconsciously conceived it as adverse in its influence. A quality, hostile and ruinous, seemed to rise from the fields tilted into the scattered embers of the stars. She thought of America.

How hopefully she had returned from there to Rowe Green. She recalled the day of her reunion with Marie. A fortnight ago! She moaned silently. The sweet preparation, the dreams, the delighted intentions.

Against her palm the umbrella handle felt smooth and damp. Her grasp of it tightened.

She became suddenly savage. Everything had happened through that girl's presence.

She had been walking more composedly; now she hurried, clutching her coat in front with a faithful mechanical

remembrance of Marie's wish that the silk dress should be hidden, walking now in the road, now on the grass, glaring ahead, munching with her lips.

Dido's figure stood before her, advanced to her, powerful and ruthless, out of the remote unknown multitude which shared with her the light of the stars and sun. Intrusion, she weepingly declared. Nothing would have happened if Dido had not come into their lives. Upon Dido she cast the responsibility. She felt she could not bear to meet Dido. Entrance into the house became an added torment because Dido was in it, wrecking its security, its happiness, its power. The house was no longer home. She was again shaken by that sense of an impious act of violation. She stormed silently and almost without outward expression. Scenes of her life with Henry, of Marie's childhood and girlhood, occurred to her. The house was a temple. She had a moment of frenzy wherein she felt herself compelled by justice to cast Dido out, breaking her, obliterating her—an act of justice, a defense of Henry, of Marie, of her own motherhood, imposed upon her by that motherhood.

Now the Green lay before her.

PART III
MISS HAMMOND

CHAPTER I
THE END OF THAT DAY

I

SHE went with energy and a fixed, angry stare through the porch and into the hall. Miss Hyde and Miss Wilson were standing there together, their bodies touching, a look of solemnity on their faces. They were both speaking. She gazed at them irritably.

They ceased speaking. Openly they observed her figure, her dramatic and disheveled figure; the mud, the scratches, the torn places; her inflamed face, her burning glance as at something not visible nor present.

She became sensible of their scrutiny. "What's the matter?" she demanded harshly. She laid one hand on the banisters.

Miss Wilson looked discomposed. "It's Miss Hammond," she explained. She cleared her throat. "I went up with her supper and she wasn't in her room, and so I looked in the garden . . ."

"We looked all over it," Miss Hyde broke in. "Every corner. We didn't miss a corner and she isn't there. . . ."

"So we looked through the rooms and we were just saying she must have gone out when you came in."

"And knowing you wanted to know when she went out," Miss Hyde said, energetically nodding and glancing, "we

were just beginning to feel anxious. I was saying I'd run up and get my goloshes and go out and see if I could see her. It's dark, isn't it? She oughtn't to be out. I'm so glad you've come in. I said to Miss Wilson, 'If only Mrs. Jesson were in we shouldn't feel it such a responsibility.'"

She continued talking, but to Mrs. Jesson the rest of her sentences were meaningless. Mrs. Jesson struck the umbrella down into the stand. She drew her hands over her moist face and then looked round her at the glowing hall and the two women in it. There was fright in her gaze. Bessie, Bessie. She couldn't think. She couldn't understand.

Miss Hyde's voice died away. She stared with glistening intensely sharp eyes at Mrs. Jesson. Her expression grew momentarily more serious, more shining. She imperceptibly moved her hand towards Miss Wilson's dress, flinching a little as if she felt herself in the presence of some manifestation, awful and sublime.

Miss Wilson's eyes stood motionless and dull like circles of plush. Their stare seemed to take in all of that upright, big body with its rich disorder, that convulsed face, almost childish in its pain and perplexity. Her fingers stole behind her. A sudden senseless little noise cracked out on the deep quietude. She was lifting and releasing again one of the handles on the bureau.

Mrs. Jesson spoke loudly. "Miss Hammond gone out? I'll go and look for her. It wasn't your fault, Nelly." She stood still, staring over their heads.

Involuntarily they glanced behind them, not perceiving in their nervousness that she gazed only at the marching shapes of the actions demanded of her—the practical, sim-

ple duties, all disengaging themselves from blackness, from void, and ranging themselves before her mental vision.

When she spoke again in the same loud, abrupt tone, the soft little heads of the women jerked round once more with a curious bobbing look as of things impelled hither and thither by some masterful force.

"I'll go out," she repeated. "Light a fire in her room, Nelly, because she'll be frightened perhaps, if she's run out with any notion. She may have got alarmed about me. She's so sensitive. And I can't always hide from her that I'm worried, and . . ."

She became lost in her hopeless, fixed stare. The women neither moved nor spoke. Then she started, looked severely and intently at them both, made an unmeaning movement with her hands, and went rapidly out on to the road again.

It was now quite dark. She looked vacantly at the Green, at the huddle of houses round it, spotted with lights, at the dark luster of the pond under the mysterious bending forms of the willows, at the weak pallor of the roadway flung between the flat, opaque levels like a band of light on the surface of an unfathomable sea.

She moved across the grass towards the road.

The round little knobs on the stiff reed spikes rapped against her boots; the grass spread about her with that illusive look of depth, of gentle flowing. The moonless sky swept up into a flawless, bloomed arch, seeming to shake off stars like a golden dew.

She kept her eyes fixed on the road. When in the splash of light outside the Crown Inn she saw the figures of two women she experienced no emotion. She went forward, un-

conscious of her surroundings, almost unconscious of her aim.

The two figures stood facing each other, oddly motionless and unnatural. As she drew near to the edge of the grass she could see the prudent impassivity of Bessie's face, she heard Bessie speaking in a squeaky voice.

"I'm afraid I shall have to go away from here," Bessie was saying. "I'm bringing such trouble on all the kind friends. I'm so grateful to you all. I mustn't bring trouble on you. I must go away."

Then she saw Mrs. Jesson. Her eyes rolled a little. She became silent.

"Bessie," Mrs. Jesson called. She went quickly to Bessie and clasped her by the arm. In the soft yellow lamplight the whites of Bessie's eyes gleamed humidly as she rolled them, again.

"What nonsense are you talking, dear? What makes you think you must go away? I told you, Bessie, that there was no trouble."

She turned to the other woman, who was speechless and staring.

"It's a fancy of hers," she explained. "I'm sorry she bothered you. What made you come out, Bessie?"

She began to lead the old woman in the direction of the house.

Bessie did not resist. She walked, moving her legs only, staring in front of her, her hands doubled on her bosom. She began to speak in the same high, intense little voice.

"So sorry to have given you trouble. I bring so much trouble to you, don't I? I'm sure I'd better go away. It's

all through me that you're worried. Did you come to look for me? So kind of you. Such a lot of trouble. I think I'd better go back to America."

America! The name momentarily distracted Mrs. Jesson from the assurances she, with weariness, was shaping in her mind. It plunged her back into the abyss of her own futile desire.

"Oh, America, Bessie. You don't want to go back more than I do. If I could get back there—with Marie—I should be happy."

She had a pause of luminous intuition in which she did not notice that Bessie had stopped and that she, unconsciously responsive, had stopped too.

She laughed abruptly, a smile of wisdom and irony in her eyes.

"At least I think I should be happy. I imagine everything would be different out there, but it wouldn't. I shouldn't be any less a mother. I can't get away from my terrors by flying to America."

She noticed that they were standing still. "What are we stopping for? Come along, dear. Why did you come out? You know, Bessie, that it's nothing but happiness for me to have you here. Come along now, dear. I'm very tired, and it's past your supper-time."

She pulled at Bessie's arm. She thought how irritating Bessie was. Perceiving the possibility of trouble with Bessie, a feeling of despair came over her. She suddenly saw herself lying on her bed in the cool and dark room. Her fatigue was so great. She trembled with her nervous, passionate desire to lie down—and forget. Now she felt that

oblivion was all she wished for, and it seemed to her that Bessie alone made that wish vain.

She pulled at the fat, soft arm without moving the bulky figure inflexibly stationed in the middle of the grassy track. She senselessly stared at the spongy, round face wherein the eyes appeared black and dimly lustrous.

“What terrors?” Bessie said. Her hands jerked a little upwards towards her chin. “Why do you want to fly to America?”

Through her open mouth her breath came gaspingly. She looked petrified by an inexplicable dread. She seemed to stand, slightly tilted toward Mrs. Jesson, with a look of preparedness for flight in all her tense and swollen limbs. “What terror?” she said again, with an intonation of heart-felt excitement.

“Bessie, Bessie, why can’t you understand me, dear? It’s my way of talking—a silly way, because I’m worried, and tired. There’s no terror for you. You’re quite safe, dear. Come on in. Why did you come out? What’s the matter with you, Bessie? I thought you knew you could feel quite safe and happy here.”

Bessie moved forward again, taking little, unsteady steps. She looked round her, stirring her eyes only, cautiously refraining from moving her head.

“I wondered where you were,” she said. “You never go out. And it seemed such a long time. So sorry if I’ve worried you when you’re tired.”

With an air of suspended breath, of extreme though controlled terror, she slightly turned her head and looked over her shoulder. “Such a nice woman that was,” she chattered

on. "I asked her if she'd seen you. We're nearly at the house now, aren't we? I can see people in the porch. Now you can lie down. You aren't angry with me, are you?"

"You know I'm not, Bessie. If I speak harshly to you, dear, it's for your own good. You mustn't make so much of trifles. . . . I told Nellie to light a fire in your room. She'll have your supper ready at once."

Silently they crossed the Green. They did not hurry; they dragged their feet through the long grass and wet pulpy places, pressing close to each other, staring at the porch, a primrose-colored square with dark moving shadows in it. Both had a weary and yet vigilant expression.

They reached the road. Without diverting her eyes from the porch, but with a cunning look growing on her unreadable and gloomy face, Bessie whispered:

"Do you think we shall go back to America—soon?"

"I don't know, Bessie. I want to." She looked round her at the lustrous curves of space poised over shapes which stood abrupt and still. "I want nothing more. It's the dearest wish of my heart."

She dropped Bessie's arm and strode across the road to the porch. She looked at Dido and Hob, at Miss Wilson and Miss Hyde.

"Miss Jesson hasn't come back?" she said.

"No," Miss Wilson replied.

Bessie's feet pattered quickly after her. She heard, like a little cry extracted by some sudden arbitrary force, Bessie's questions rising with a weak and vain sound from the deep blackness behind. "Where can Marie be? She ought

to be in. now, oughtn't she? Is that why you're worried? I'm so sorry. I wonder where she is."

Mrs. Jesson paused, staring at the four others. She stood erect and silent before them, and they did not speak to her but looked back with confused uneasy expressions.

Her gaze at last rested on Dido. Dido's presence there with Hob drew from her a loud trembling answer to Bessie.

"She's out with Mr. Ainger, Bessie."

She looked with rage and hate at Dido. In her soul there was storm. Her hands and face grew damp. She could hardly see and she felt as though she had been struck mentally with death, so complete was her inability to shape one thought.

"Out with Mr. Ainger," Bessie echoed her words, and the sentence reached her. She turned her back to Dido.

"Get Miss Hammond her supper at once, Nellie," she said, going into the hall.

Miss Wilson uttered a breathless assent and followed them out of the porch. She went towards the kitchen, holding her head very still with an appearance of being frozen beyond movement, beyond sound.

Mrs. Jesson mounted a few stairs. She then turned.

"You're coming up, Bessie?" she said.

Miss Hammond, her head sunk on her shoulders, was staring at Dido.

"Yes, oh yes. I'm coming," she exclaimed, looking round.

With a guilty and meek expression she followed Mrs. Jesson.

At her door they both stopped. They looked at each other. Mrs. Jesson dimly wondered over Bessie, over her

presence there and her significance. She saw neither reality nor importance in Bessie. She felt, vaguely and yet deeply, irritated by the sense of other existences moving round her. The house seemed full of stir; it seemed crowded, and she fiercely though hardly consciously resented the sounds and actions which distracted her from the immense purpose of her life. Marie and herself. She wanted to be alone in the house, in the world, with Marie. And they all intervened. She wanted to sweep them away. The house had passed beyond her possession. She hated every one of the figures in it. Dido and Hob, her heart wailed.

She put out her hand as if to push Bessie away. She walked quickly down the passage.

“Don’t you like her being out with Mr. Ainger?” Bessie piped up, with a movement of her whole body towards Mrs. Jesson.

The mother turned. “Oh, Bessie, I hate it. I’m afraid. If it were Mr. Ramsay . . . But Miss Baird has taken him. If I’d known I’d never have let her stay in the house.”

She darted a look vengeful and black towards the staircase. Then she opened her door and went in. She stood in the darkness, listening.

Bessie’s irresolute shufflings, the murmur of voices in the porch, faint, sharp noises in the kitchen—there were no other sounds than these.

She closed the door.

She gazed through the darkness at a vision of Marie, figuring Marie as a child who looked at her with a woman’s eyes, a child weak, desirous, helpless, turning to her for gifts, for protection, with a deep faith in her omnipotence.

“Oh, Marie, I can’t give you what you want,” she cried.

The confession of her impotence seemed awful to her, awful and incomprehensible as the failure of some law of nature. There came strangely into her mind memory of her hour of childbirth. She cast an incredulous look at the broad, dim bed. There seemed to be something monstrous near her, but she did not know what it was.

“Oh, why do we bear children?” she said, moving away from the door. “They don’t understand our love; they don’t return it, and there comes a time when we fail them. They look to us and we can’t answer. . . . My love, and my longing to help her are—are——” She could not think of the word. Angrily she felt for the matches, and struck one in a feverish and stupid way so that she broke it—“are frustrated,” she continued with a kind of gloomy triumph, “by that girl. Something unforeseen falls on us and we’re helpless. That girl makes all my love useless.”

She stood without movement, full of horror as at some act of cruelty, full of self-sympathy. And not for a moment did she cease to listen for Marie’s return.

CHAPTER II

THE NIGHT. IN MISS WILSON'S ROOM

I

At ten o'clock that night Dido went up to bed. Hilda was already in the bedroom.

Having reached the bend in the staircase, Dido paused for a moment to look through the narrow window at the Green, and at the sky with its stars.

She saw a man and woman on the road near the gate and recognized Marie and Jimmy. Her lips curled in a smile and she saw Marie's restrained but provocative movements, the sudden lifting of Jimmy's arms towards Marie's shoulders. His finger-tips touched Marie. Then he was grotesquely patting space. Marie had sprung resolutely to the gate. She waved him off with her hand.

Dido continued her way upstairs, her face calm and happy.

"I certainly haven't dealt a mortal blow to Marie," she thought. "But what a frightful descent—Jimmy after Hob!"

She reached the landing and glanced down the corridor which lay over the hall. At the end of this corridor there was another wide window, and she saw Miss Wilson staring through, as she had done, at the road and its scene.

Dido stopped. She felt checked in her happiness. She looked with perplexity at Miss Wilson. Tragic, pitiful figure with those decorations of lace and ribbon! Timidity

oppressed Dido. She had a keen and wounding perception of Miss Wilson's loneliness, her immense loneliness and anguish as she looked down at Marie and Jimmy. She was beyond reach of succor, condemned to solitary contemplation of her woe. No one could, no one dared, stretch out a hand and clasp her. And yet only a few feet of space separated her from Dido, and Dido's heart meekly and compassionately sought her.

Hardly breathing, her head sunk on her chest with a pensive and ascetic look, Dido waited.

Miss Wilson almost immediately turned. Her dilated eyes looked straight at Dido. She at once left the window and took a few steps down the corridor. She began to finger the lace on her sleeves. Her soft, dull eyebrows were arched. She had a stupefied and blind appearance.

Dido's gaze was supplicating; it entreated the confidence and naturalness she did not dare request in words. Pent-up emotion! Miss Wilson would make herself distracted with it. If only she could pour it out on Dido. Convention and pretenses and formalities—they were all horrible things.

And yet, at the same time, Dido wished to evade inclusion in Miss Wilson's life. She was dismayed by her responsibility. One part of her mind insidiously denied that Miss Wilson had any claims on her.

Life was so much more simple if there was only oneself and those few whom one loved to be considered. For all these chance visitants from the vast surrounding multitude to have also to be recognized and assisted—that was a tremendous thing.

But she could not turn from that clear duty. Through

her mere humanity Miss Wilson had claims on her. She dumbly offered herself to Miss Wilson.

"Just going to bed?" the other woman said in a trembling, hoarse voice. She laughed, and her laugh was dreadful to Dido because of its perversity and unnaturalness.

Dido flushed. She lowered her eyes with the feeling that there was something wrong and therefore ugly in Miss Wilson's rejection of her help, in her denial of any need of help. She imagined herself guilty of bad taste or impertinence, and she chafed at a system of relationship which could make her generous impulses seem thus.

"Yes," she replied. "Good night."

"Good night," Miss Wilson repeated in the same tearful and giggling voice.

Dido went on and into her bedroom.

II

Hilda was sitting at the mirror, brushing her hair.

Dido walked rapidly over to her, speaking in an agitated and yet half-humorous voice.

"Marie's just come back with Jimmy, and Jimmy was endeavoring to embrace her." She stood still, laughing, and furtively gazing at Hilda, from under her thin, quivering lids. "I imagine there'll be an engagement announced soon. I can't conceive any one falling in love with Jimmy, can you? . . . And Miss Wilson has been gazing at them from the landing window and saw the attempted embrace."

Hilda put down the brush. "Oh, dear," she said. "Poor thing. Then she knows now? . . ."

"That it was all a delusion? Yes. She looked stricken. I'm awfully sorry. But if people will be so mad . . . I don't like to think what she must be feeling now."

She sat down on a chair near Hilda and took off her brooch and watch.

"Poor thing," Hilda repeated but with a different intonation, one, now, not of dismay but of placid acceptance of Miss Wilson as a victim. "Still, it's all her own fault. I can't think how she could be so silly. He hadn't given her the slightest cause to think such a thing."

Dido glanced at her. She saw with gladness Hilda's perfect re-establishment in her slightly dogmatic calm and good sense. Hilda's gaze was exquisitely without shadow.

How secure Dido now felt! She did not think she could ever again lose sight of Hilda. There drifted into her mind the Russian proverb which Turgenev's *Duellist* several times uttered, "The heart of another is a dark forest." She could apply that to the other hearts in the house, but not to Hilda's. Ever since she returned with Hob from Horsham and brought him in to dinner Hilda had been penetrable and familiar. Unerringly Dido had perceived her mental and emotional flights; she knew that Hilda was unchanged; she believed her to be unchangeable; she believed that the whole orbit of Hilda's movements was known to her.

She smiled, keeping her eyes on Hilda in happy expectancy.

What she expected, Hilda almost at once brought out. "I don't think I'm very interested in Miss Wilson," Hilda said, smiling too. "I'd rather hear how you got on at Hors-

ham." She began to laugh, looking at Dido with delighted, significant eyes. "That is, if it isn't too precious to tell! I imagine it may be."

Dido laughed. She kept her hands motionless in her lap. Her little face remained motionless, flushed, and discreet.

"Of course not," she said presently.

As she did not go on, Hilda, brushing gently, said: "I've always looked forward to the time when you'd have some one in love with you, Dido. I thought it would be so exciting. We should have so much to talk about. I suppose there'll be a great deal you won't tell me; I'll guess that instead! But do tell me anything that isn't too—too spoony. I'm longing to hear it. I am really."

She gave Dido her open, truthful eyes. "I think he's good enough for you," she said, with some energy. "I'm sure aunt and uncle will think so too."

She was serious for a moment. Then she colored; she laughed in her girlish, embarrassed way; her small shoulders and her severe head shook with her laughter.

Dido pressed her palms against her cheeks; she closed her eyes, savoring her deep joy.

"Hilda, you are an idiot."

They laughed together. Dido then went on. "What he most wanted to convince me of was not anything 'spoony' at all; it was that he didn't like Miss Bessant and was surprised to find her visiting here. I said I thought nothing was more natural considering the position she holds in Miss Jesson's life—bosom friend, ally, model. And he said, 'That's just it—*model*,' and looked very enigmatical. I'm

sure he meant to convey something. He said almost at once afterwards that he liked Mrs. Jesson. . . . Hilda, Mrs. Jesson hates me.”

Hilda gasped. “Nonsense.”

“Oh, she does. She likes him and she doesn’t like Jimmy. I’m awfully sorry. You can’t seem to do anything in this world without hurting some one else.”

There was a silence. Then Hilda said in a cold, thin voice:

“If other people are hurt, Dido, it’s their own fault. It certainly isn’t your fault. I think Mrs. Jesson’s unjust. You didn’t try to get him. And besides—I don’t believe he ever cared for Marie.”

“She hates me,” Dido repeated musingly. “She thinks he cared. She thinks I’ve robbed Marie. She adores Marie.”

Frowning, but with a perplexed smile on her lips, she took a slide out of her hair. “I seem, innocently, to have upset everything. It’s a horrid idea. If I wasn’t here Hob might have had Marie and then Jimmy mightn’t have come here and subjugated—also innocently, poor man!—Miss Wilson, and Mrs. Jesson would have been happy. How we all affect each other! . . . Admire my wisdom, Hilda.”

Hilda looked blank. “I don’t think you can talk like that. I think one brings things on oneself. People aren’t sensible. You haven’t done anything. . . . But never mind the others. Tell me about Horsham.”

Dido’s face grew subtle and joyful. After a moment she began to take down her hair, speaking from behind it of Hob.

III

After she was in bed she lay thinking. She heard the others coming to their rooms, and slight scraping noises on the verandah. Silence at last fell on the house, and then her musing became more peaceful, more egotistical.

The time passed and still she did not sleep.

It seemed to her that there had been silence for an hour when at last she heard a sound in a room across the corridor. With a contraction of the heart she recognized it as the sound of some one weeping.

She lifted her head from the pillow. She experienced a feeling of tension and dismay as she listened to those muffled sobs falling on the perfect quietude of the house.

"It's Miss Wilson," she thought.

She sat up in bed, her gaze resting on the door. She forgot Hob and her own happiness. She thought,

"Oh, poor thing; poor silly little thing."

A few minutes passed. Now the steady weeping had become inexpressibly painful to her. She glanced at Hilda, but there was no movement from Hilda. She looked through the window, but she could not distract herself from her intent and perturbed listening.

A vivid picture of Miss Wilson came before her. She thought she had never heard anything so mournful and hopeless as that sobbing. She began to imagine Miss Wilson's state of mind, arriving at a conception of loneliness, of anguish, which made her feel that an involuntary cry of distress, a cry for succor, was coming to her from that room.

She irresolutely moved the sheets off herself. "Shall I go to her?" she whispered. "She hasn't much reticence. She told us all about it. She hasn't the feelings of pride we should have, and she's absolutely no self-control. . . . Good heavens, it sounds awful. I think I must go."

Still she sat hesitating, staring at her picture of Miss Wilson cowering amid the ruins of her hopes, circumscribed by all the terrors of moral gloom and solitude, of frustration and poverty.

Determinedly she got out of bed, she put on slippers and her dressing-gown; then stealthily she opened the door and stepped into the dark passage.

She felt adventurous and apprehensive, she felt ashamed as if she were doing something ridiculous or unwise. There appeared to be an ironical and contemptuous look on all the closed, faintly glistening doors. The silence was cruel. Clearer now, that weeping seemed to rise from the heart of an immense vacuity as if Miss Wilson were alone of her kind. It became impossible to believe that she was surrounded by beings to whom her sorrow must be comprehensible, and to whom it should be momentous.

Dido tapped on her door.

The weeping ceased. She heard the bed creak. She tapped again and then went in.

"It's I—Miss Baird," she said softly. "I do hope you don't mind my coming in. But it distressed me so . . . and it seems so stupid that there should be any pretense. If I can help you . . ."

She had closed the door. Carefully she felt her way to the bed. Miss Wilson was sitting up in bed. Her back

was to the window, and Dido could see only her long, flat, white figure, the circular frill of a collar, and a little flat head where the hair sagged in a weak roll at the base; she could just distinguish Miss Wilson's eyes, and, looking like weals, a few pieces of hair stuck to her wet cheeks.

Dido sat down on a chair by the bed. Her face felt burning, and she could not speak. She wished she hadn't come; she thought with longing of her room, and Hilda, and the ghostly Hob with whom she had been communing. She felt as if she were cut off from that room for ever. Miss Wilson, motionless, speechless, but audibly breathing, beside her, had become suddenly unmanageable, alarming; she had become a burden, a menace.

Dido turned her head and looked timidly and appealingly at Miss Wilson.

The pitiful woman gasped, cleared her throat, moved her hands on the frills of the nightgown.

"It's very kind of you," she said.

There was a silence. She twitched the frill, moving her wild head, staring blindly and vacantly downward.

Dido frowned at the floor. "You told us about it, you see," she said without expression. "And it seemed so horrid to leave you alone. If you don't want to talk . . . I don't know what you want. It's so hard to get to know any one, isn't it? I want to do whatever you think will help you."

Miss Wilson burst out weeping. She did not cover her face; she vehemently dragged at her collar, her face convulsed, her eyes wide open in that look of bewildered wretchedness.

"It's most kind of you," she gasped. "To think that any

one cares. . . . People are so cruel. . . . They don't believe you've feelings. . . . I've never had any one love me or care about me . . . never . . ."

She panted, making tortured little sounds in her throat, rolling her eyes, shuddering.

Dido bent towards her. She put out her hands to Dido; with extraordinary strength she pressed Dido's hands; then she released them; she began to pull the counterpane into little ridges, she spoke rapidly, choking and gasping between her words, but at once continuing as though she heaped up a terrible accusation against an invisible enemy in the presence of a witness whom she might at any moment lose, whom she must impress, appal, afflict, secure.

"I thought he wanted me. . . . He always talked to me when he came. He put himself out to talk to me. . . . And now I see him with that other girl. . . . I believe he still wants me. But she's tried to get him . . . and she's got money—and she's a lady."

She moved her narrow body with an effect of desperation and anguish.

"It's been disappointment—and giving love—and not getting any back all through my life," she panted, glaring senselessly before her. "I thought I was going to be happy this time. I thought he loved me—he did—and now . . ."

She clutched her knees, she whimpered, she threw a terrified and desolate glance at Dido. "I've always suffered," she cried, sobbing and trembling. "It's cruel—people are so cruel—you feel for me. I've been treated so—all my life—cruelly. You're the only one who seemed to care whether—I was alive—or dead."

She wailed the last word. Her weeping became terrible. Dido was trembling, and without thought, without light of any kind. She touched Miss Wilson with stiff hands, she made little, reassuring, meaningless sounds. She felt bitter and angry towards something without in the least knowing what was the object of her rage.

"It's so kind of you," Miss Wilson went on, "it does help me—to know some one understands and feels for me. I seem always to have been alone. If I've thought I was going to have a friend—they've always disappointed me and turned out different—to what I expected. . . . I've met with nothing but ingratitude—and unkindness—on every side. People don't care how much they make you suffer.

. . . I used to think—when I was a little girl—that some day a beautiful lady would come and love me and take me away. . . . I always wanted some one I could love—and trust—some one to love me—and I've found that you can't trust anybody—they only think of themselves; they don't know how to love. . . . I shall never be able to believe in any one again. Everybody I trusted has failed me. . . . I know what people are now. . . . They're not worth thinking about—caring about. Not one person in this house cares what I feel—or what becomes of me—except you. I shall always remember you for this."

Her voice had dropped to a hoarse monotone. She sighed deeply, her hands began to grope over the upper part of the bed. In a silence she found her handkerchief and pressed it upon her eyes.

"What ought I to say?" Dido was wondering.

She felt pity for Miss Wilson, but she was no longer an-

gered and excited. Miss Wilson's sufferings were seen to be self-created. She was an idealist. Her sentimentality was immense and stupid. But how passionate was her feeling of isolation, her desire for alliance! Universal desire! Gazing at the spare, bowed figure and abject head, Dido knew that, consciously brooding over the wrongs, the deprivations, the disillusionments she had suffered, Miss Wilson was unconsciously yielding herself to a new warmth and light, the warmth and light of Dido's touch, glance, voice. When she spoke again Dido had a fresh conception of her—she was speaking now in an unrealized but strong sense of her reality, her importance, to some one else; she suffered, but her suffering was complicated by a wonderful calm in the knowledge of contact, of union, achieved at last. She was known, she was seen. With every sentence she proved to Dido the singular fineness and interest of her personality.

In the darkness Dido's eyes smiled seriously.

"I shall always remember it," Miss Wilson said, lifting her head and gazing towards the window. "I shan't stop here, I couldn't after what's happened. I couldn't speak to him knowing how he's treated me. Some people can forget anything; they haven't—they haven't any ideas as to how one person ought to behave to another. I have."

She compressed her lips. There was a vibration all along her body.

"I shall leave here to-morrow," she said. "I can't stop another day—and see them . . ."

"You'll go to your sister?"

For an instant Miss Wilson remained silent and immobile. Then again she burst into sobs.

"I—can't—bear it," she whimpered between her sobs. "It makes me so unhappy. . . . I wish I'd never come here. . . . S-some people can be happy."

She jumped out of bed, flinging the sheets from her with a violent movement. She walked up and down the rug by the bed, pulling at the handkerchief, muttering and weeping.

Dido went to her.

"I've suffered so," Miss Wilson moaned, giving her a wild look. "You're very kind—but you can't do anything . . . no one can. . . . I love babies so too."

She stood still, her hands over her haggard cheeks, her body shaken by her noisy sobs. Loudly and hoarsely she cried out her sentences, standing, with a ragged and insane look in the weak diffusion of light from the window.

"I can't go back—to my sister . . . should see them still . . . must go away . . . London . . . a married friend there. . . . Oh, oh, oh! . . . how could he. . . . I've always—wanted to be married. . . . I feel so bad."

She drew a long, shuddering breath, her teeth chattering.

"Lie down again," Dido said, embracing her and feeling bones through the thin flesh. "You must do what I tell you."

Miss Wilson clambered into bed with a meek and exhausted look. She lay down, her eyes closed, her mouth screwed up.

Dido caressed her. "Go to your friend's to-morrow," she said, "and leave me the address. I will think what can be done."

"I've got—to earn my own living."

"I know. That's what I'm considering. Now shall I nip down and make you some tea?"

Miss Wilson rolled a negative head.

"You'd better go back—to bed," she mumbled. "You'll be tired. I'm very grateful. I think I shall sleep—I'm so worn out."

Dido thought, "You poor wretched fool."

She kissed the mass of tears and sticky hair on Miss Wilson's cheek. "Don't think no one cares. My cousin and I will both see what we can do, only you mustn't cry any more. Nor speak as if you're too old to have any chance of marriage. I'm sure you'll meet some one who will—love you."

She had a momentary glimpse of enormous and ghastly comedy. She could have laughed. She straightened herself and gazed down at the melancholy body stretched out starkly with a look of death, and she felt impatient and contemptuous. Miss Wilson was breathing faintly like something smaller and feebler than a woman. At the same time, scarcely stronger than that breathing, she thought she heard a sound in the passage.

She looked towards the door, and the silence seemed profound. She had a sense of the great polished dome of the sky built beyond the window, and the limbs of the hills outspread, and not a sound, not a movement for miles until the land ended at the edge of a glittering and rumbling sea.

"Then I may leave you?" she said, bending again.

"Yes. Thank you—so. Good night."

Miss Wilson opened her eyes. With an expression of shame and pride she looked at Dido.

Dido smiled. She cleared Miss Wilson's face of hair. "Good night. Give me the address to-morrow. Go to sleep now."

She deepened her tender, reassuring smile. Rapidly she went to the door; she opened it and stepped into the passage; she cast a guarded glance round her.

On the opposite wall, a few yards away, she saw a motionless, floating object, without shape, without color. She experienced an uncontrollable childish feeling of dread. She shut Miss Wilson's door and the action seemed courageous, irremediable; it seemed to leave her at the mercy of the house. The peculiar atmosphere of the house, tense under its silence, violent under its impassivity, rolled upon her, mastered her. She felt as though she had been thrown at the house and it had captured her; the walls slid to left and right of her with the look of barriers; the low ceiling hovered over her with a stifling pressure.

She stared keenly at that opaque bulge on the wall and found herself staring at two round ball-like eyes which, still and prudent and strange as an animal's, were directed to her own face.

"It's Miss Hammond," her mind said.

At once she derisively criticized herself. She stepped noiselessly but swiftly towards her own door, a little beyond which Miss Hammond stood.

Miss Hammond instantly retreated, rubbing the wall with her head and shoulders, her large, pale hands spread on it like lumps of fungus.

Dido beamed. "Do you want anything, Miss Hammond?" she whispered. "You're all right?"

Extraordinary house!

"I don't want anything," Miss Hammond replied with some precipitation. "Quite all right, thank you." She stopped retreating, her face in its lividness coming out on the darkness above her dim dressing-gown like the upturned floating face of one drowning. "So kind of you to ask," she said with a stern, gloomy look.

Dido smiled, abandoning the idea of solving the old woman's presence here. She went into her own room and closed the door firmly.

"What people!" she ejaculated under her breath. "Positively I can't take Miss Hammond too as one of my responsibilities! The love victim is quite sufficient. What an exciting time!"

She merrily regarded the sleeping Hilda. In the passage she could hear Miss Hammond's amazing wandering. Her look grew fixed and absent. Miss Wilson, Miss Hammond, Mrs. Jesson—all disturbed, all struggling for security, for peace. What passionate rebellions and despairing conflicts those rooms concealed!

She made a movement with her hands, affirming her irresponsibility. And she was again chilled by the feeling of being netted, possessed. She couldn't free herself. The room wasn't hers. It belonged to the house. Closing the door, she had not closed out the house. She was without refuge, without defense. Those other conflicts rumbled round her; they tossed, impelled, and covered her.

She walked gravely to the table by her bed, and taking up

the glass of lemonade there, drank a little. She would have lighted a candle and read, only she was afraid she would awaken Hilda.

Thinking of Hob, she lay down in bed.

CHAPTER III

WITHDRAWAL

I

THE next morning as Mrs. Jesson was leaving the dining-room after breakfast, Miss Wilson came out of the kitchen and, looking at her, stood still against the nearly closed door.

Mrs. Jesson looked back. "Do you want anything, Nellie?" she asked.

Trembling and gasping, her glance wandering, Miss Wilson answered: "Yes, Mrs. Jesson. I'm very sorry. I hope it won't put you out. I don't like to—to seem not to consider you but—I can't help myself."

She nodded her head up and down. "You've always been kind to me. But I feel—that it's a matter. . . . I must think of myself, I mean."

"What is it you want, Nellie?" Mrs. Jesson asked, with a savage, exasperated glance.

Miss Wilson's eyes became indignant and tragical.

"I want to leave here," she said. "I want to go at once." She lost her firmness. "I feel—it's not treating you well, but I can't give a month's notice. I'd rather lose the money. I want to go at once. I'm—I'm sorry. But I must think of myself. I'm forced. . . . I don't want to say anything.

It's better not. I—— It will take me to-day to pack and write to my friend. Of course I'll see to everything to-day, and Miss Hyde—she says she'll be pleased to help in any way she can—after I'm gone."

Mrs. Jesson's look remained dark and severe, but her displeasure over the mere fact that Nellie existed to distract her from her deep brooding had vanished. She felt wonder and interest as she gazed at Nellie. Nellie was in trouble. It appeared to her as if in the course of an eternal anguished march along the bottom of a lightless pit she was arrested by a cry similar to the cry of her own heart; she glimpsed the nearness of another abyss of desolation.

But how could Nellie suffer? Nellie was not a mother.

"Aren't you happy here?" she demanded.

Miss Wilson's pointed face sank, achieving a ruined look.

"It—it's nothing to do with my position here. You've always been very kind. I can't give any reason. It's——" She stooped and shrank back against the door. "It's a private matter. I want to go. I hope—you won't blame me."

"Of course not, Nellie."

Staring at that bent body, that hanging face, she tried to think what Nellie's trouble could be. But it was impossible to think. In her mind there seemed a deadness; she could only stare at the woman, with a perception of the door, and an angle of tiled sink and wall beyond. This woman was unimportant. She had no place in Mrs. Jesson's life.

Yet she spoke with an intonation of kindness because, far off and small, something seemed to tell her that she must be kind. Neither her brain nor her heart so warned

her—both were silent, both frozen. It was as if Miss Wilson herself begged, “Treat me gently.”

“If you want to go, Nellie, you must. I wouldn’t put any obstacle in your way. But I shall be sorry to lose you. Is there anything I can do to help you?”

Miss Wilson shook her head; she muttered incoherent words, and still moved backwards, pushing the door open with her shoulders.

“You must do what you want, Nellie. Don’t worry. . . . Eh? Oh, your wages. We’ll see about that, dear. I don’t want you to lose anything because——”

She was silent while with a look of troubled perplexity she caught sight of some obscure conflict, heard the murmurs of a passionate protest and lamentation. She looked at Nellie intently, unhappily. There was a stir through all her brain as though she awakened to life through the dim consciousness of the beat and swirl of a deep misery near her own, and human like her own.

“Can’t I help you, Nellie?” she said, her eyes expressing fear and personal woe and kinship in suffering.

Miss Wilson did not look up. She again shook her crushed head. “You’re very kind, Mrs. Jesson, but it’s better that I shouldn’t say anything.”

Her air of mystery passed unnoticed. Mrs. Jesson, sighing, continued as if there had been no break in continuity—“just because you feel obliged to go in such a hurry. I don’t know what your trouble is, Nellie, but don’t let any thought about money worry you. That will be all right.”

She looked furtively and apprehensively at the closed dining-room door. Marie would say she was quixotic and

foolish. But Marie needn't know anything about it. It was so unpleasant always to exact one's rights. What were a few shillings? Of course Marie was right; but——

“Don't let that worry you, Nellie,” she repeated in a firm voice.

Nellie's fragmentary response at last ceased. They stood without movement, not looking at each other. Then Miss Wilson stepped back. At once Mrs. Jesson went quickly on into the hall. She stared round her. She wondered what she had been about to do before Nellie stopped her. She paused and tried to recall her intention.

She noticed how quiet the house was. A dim veil of sunlight covered the Green and hung thick and silvery over Broad Down. There was a smell of burning weeds in the air.

Inconsequently she thought of her sisters. Her face formed into an expression of deep gentleness and longing. She went up the stairs, without aim, simply because she felt the need of movement.

“If we could only go back to America,” she thought, repeating the words many times.

She noticed that the door of the linen-cupboard was open, and she crossed to it and gazed steadily into the dark recess. She began to touch the linen.

“Marie might meet some one there who was good enough for her,” she thought.

Her hands grew still. She must return to America; she would.

“What am I doing here?” she exclaimed, staring round the cupboard in surprise.

“She closed the door and then stood looking at it, seeing the ship, the sea, her sisters.

II

Miss Wilson left the house the next morning at half-past nine. She was catching the ten-thirty train at Mellbury.

Mrs. Jesson said good-bye to her in the hall. In the porch she found the cousins and Miss Hyde.

Dido gave her hand a firm, manly pressure. “I’ll write to you,” she said. “You won’t mind meeting us again, will you? At another place, I mean, not here?”

“No, no. I should like to. You’ve done me so much good.” Miss Wilson bent her head and pulled a glove on.

“I shall be lonely without you,” Miss Hyde exclaimed, with a peevish, wandering stare round. “No one to talk to. Dull—that’s what it will be. I’m sorry you’re going, but of course”—she lifted her head and cast an obscurely angry expression at the sky—“things will happen; we can’t plan everything as we’d like. It’s been so nice and jolly here. I thought it was going on. But there you are—I suppose we must all have our disappointments. I hope we shall meet again. I shall often think of the chats we’ve had in the kitchen. Dull old place it will be now. I shan’t want to go into it. I feel mopey directly I think of it. Mopey. Directly I thought of it I felt something come over me—a sort of dark feeling. Horrid. I shall miss you.”

Miss Wilson gave her a dim, almost peaceful smile. She stood up a little straighter, looking at them all with a kind of meek triumph. “I like to hear you say that,” she re-

plied, clasping Miss Hyde's extended hand. "It does help—to know people care—and miss you." She glanced wanly round the Green. "I daresay I shall see you all again. I hope I shall."

She began to tremble. "Thank you—thank you all. I shall always say—if—if I've had trouble here, I've had happiness too in your kindness. I must go now. I've got a long walk."

She moved towards the gate, Miss Hyde accompanying her and still squeezing and shaking her hand.

A voice behind Dido exclaimed: "Are you going? Do wait. Say good-by to me."

Miss Hammond, with astonishing swiftness, pressed between Dido and Hilda without touching Dido and followed Miss Wilson.

"Are you going?" she repeated in a breathless little voice. "Why are you going away? Do wait."

Miss Wilson turned round.

"Do tell me why you're going," Miss Hammond urged, with a plaintive and distressed intonation. "I'm afraid I've given you such a lot of trouble and anxiety. Is that why you're going? Do tell me. I'm so sorry. I'm doing such harm to all the kind ones. I think it's I who ought to go away."

She stood with her body drawn back so that her blue cotton skirt became shorter in the front and showed her ankles and her large shoes. She kept her eyes on Miss Wilson, but she seemed to listen for some sound which might crash out in any part of the place. She waited for Miss Wilson's answer with an air of resolution.

Miss Wilson looked bewildered. She put out her hand awkwardly and in confusion. When Miss Hammond did not take it she drew it back with an appearance of vexation, of shame. "You haven't been any trouble to me," she said. "Not at all. I'm going. . . . It's quite a private matter. Good-by. I mustn't wait any longer or I shall lose my train."

She smiled at the others, receiving with a rather distraught air Miss Hyde's rapid sentences. She nodded her head, smiling and blushing.

Miss Hammond rolled her eyes round at them all, covering them with a great lusterless, ominous glare. She turned and went up the path to the house, her thick lips glued together, her face glistening with perspiration; she moved her feet very gently; a spatter of dark oak leaves on the amber mist of light made a background for her powerful and ugly head.

She entered the house.

Now Miss Wilson was crossing the Green. Miss Hyde ceased to wave her handkerchief and came back to the cousins. She looked discontentedly at them.

"Isn't everything quiet?" she said sharply. "I shall be glad when we leave this place and go to Blagdon. Poky old place, I call it. Nothing but cows—and bonfires—and trees. I don't think it's good for one to be buried alive with nothing to see but a few old cows—silly things they are too, always munching and staring and mooing—silly. It's depressing. I'm sure it isn't good. I don't feel very grand this morning. I hope I'm not going to have anything. The place is dull enough without having any one ill. I'm

sure. Miss Hammond's gone in? She gives me the creeps. I believe she's got something on her mind. If I were Mrs. Jesson I'd have a nurse for her. I believe in looking after that sort of people. You never know what they might do. She might murder us all in our beds. Oh, you can laugh. You're young and happy; you don't believe anything awful could happen. But it can. All this hollering and screeching—I believe she's got something on her mind. I hope she doesn't come bothering me. If she does, I shall tell Mrs. Jesson. I'm not going to be hollered at—not when I'm not feeling very grand. The place is dismal enough without that."

She continued these complaints at lunch and at tea-time. She said she had pains all over her. She continually made angular and unmeaning movements with her head, her innocent brows, her hands, her feet, seeming in an extremity of morose irritation. She had pauses of silence wherein she gazed moodily before her, her face disagreeable or affrighted. She looked round the room several times as if she were penetrated and crushed by a new aspect of it which she feared was to be permanent and which presently drove her to an angry scared twitter of complaints.

"Merely because Miss Wilson's gone," Dido reflected.

She thought there was something touching in Miss Hyde's vision of loneliness and hush. She found pathos in those dismayed hostile glances at the room. Miss Hyde gazed at a vast sterile disorder of material things—earth, brick, wood, and the piercing glitter of stars, the dispassionate dead beaming of moons. She saw multitudes of human beings staring at each other with cold unpleasant eyes, avoiding

each other, revolving absurdly, dying, effaced; she saw graves, meager little things, under the livid stare of those eternal stars, that silent sky. The reason for her existence seemed inscrutable.

And all because Miss Wilson had gone.

At tea-time Dido said to her:

"I shall suggest to mother that we have Miss Wilson down at Blagdon as housekeeper. We should have to bring some one from town. We should never be able to get help down here. And as we know her . . ."

"Oh, I do call that a good idea," Miss Hyde cried, beaming. "That will be nice. Just like you to think of anything like that. Always kind and considerate. Lovely. It'll be lovely. I do call that a good idea. You always think of the right idea."

For the rest of the evening she wore a calm and satisfied air.

CHAPTER IV

IMPACT

MARIE had spent the greater part of that day sitting on her bed, smoking, writing a letter, and reading. Several times Mrs. Jesson came to the dining-room window and looked through it at her, or from the pergola gazed at the verandah and the bed and the broad, curled-up figure with the lowered head and the enigmatically changing face. At each of these times she thought she would speak to Marie. Marie had not yet alluded to the walk with Jimmy and she had kept silence herself, but that silence tormented her. She thought every time she looked at Marie that she must break it, and she involuntarily clenched her hands, her body rocking towards Marie, a thunder of phrases in her head. And then she seemed to see Marie's annoyed glance, and her heart fiercely resented the affliction she proposed to cast at it. She couldn't have another scene. She must wait, be sensible, patient. What did she expect Marie to say to her? There could be nothing. And now, at least, Marie was under her eyes. . . . But who was she writing to? May? It would certainly be May. Then she thought that she hated May, and she strode through the house with a sudden purposeful air, though she had no purpose, and began energetically to shut or open windows, fill cans with water and splash water over the flowers, almost shouting at Bessie for so perpetually moving about after her instead of resting.

In the spaces of time between these scrutinies of Marie and during those which followed them she brooded over the chance that she might return to America with Marie. Her desire to do so had become an obsession. She would not think of probability, the hard probability that Marie's actions in America would be what previously they had been; she dreamed of beautiful shapings of fortune; she produced from the heart of a radiant vague scene a magnificent and noble personality; the man who should be suitable for Marie. She stood trembling, experiencing bliss and pain, as she imagined this man approaching Marie and worshiping her; she thought with terror and with longing of Marie's engagement, her marriage. At one moment she hated that man, accusing him of rendering her bereft, of making her motherhood null: did she bring Marie into the world only to resign her to one who, heretofore, had lived and known happiness and calm without Marie? She asked terrible questions of that man, disbelieving him, loathing him for what he had been; she swore that she would never let Marie go; men were vile; she would retain and preserve Marie; how frightful a thing it was to be a woman!

And the next moment she reassured herself and thought with joy of Marie as the wife of an influential man, subservient to those beautiful laws of married love, secure, making sublime abnegations; she thought of Marie as a mother.

She grew confused and dizzy through her mental stress. The scene in which she stood bewildered her by its disharmony with the events through which she felt herself to be

passing. She came to her senses with a long, astonished stare at the walls round her and the bronzed woods and hills beyond the window. She pressed her fingers against her clammy palms, dismayed by the remembrance that she had neither peace nor security nor certitude; that she was far off from those states of happiness and solemnity, destined, perhaps, never to attain them, menaced by unspeakable chances, the victim of inconceivable acts of cruelty.

It became, then, possible to relinquish the idea of America, that supreme desire, and to say that less would suffice. Contemplating the dark present, she told herself that she would abandon her sisters, her country, her dreams, if she could gain Hob for Marie. She would stay in England tranquilly if she could do that. She liked him and Marie loved him.

"I could live happily in a dungeon if she were near me and happy," she thought.

It was Hob too whom Marie wanted, not any distinguished American. But England and Jimmy Ainger.

"I can't bear that," she said, with an expression of hatred.

She stood brooding until the prospect became so certain and so awful that she impetuously resumed her movements in the house and the garden, wondering dimly how it had all come to pass, burning with resentment, and sometimes stopping and gazing at Hilda who sat reading alone, or at Bessie who persistently, speechlessly, followed her, feeling that there was something she must say and worried because she could not think what that something was.

II

When she went to bed she could not sleep. She lay with her eyes closed but without the sensation of restfulness. She kept altering the position of her head on the pillow and irritably pushing at the curling pins in which she had put her front hair. She could not cease thinking. She longed to lie blank and relaxed, but she could not. Through her closed eyelids she felt herself staring very sharply and brightly into a room where many figures moved, and a disk of sea marked with bitter-looking ridges, and streets, houses, and then furniture, hanging lights, and faces. All mingled without coherence, without distinctness.

At last, desperately, she sat up. She looked round the room. She felt very angry with herself.

“I’ll get a book and read,” she thought. “Worrying like this—it’s so silly. I’ve never been quite so silly before. But I knew when Marie’s marriage came near . . .”

Again she looked round the room, not understanding the meaning, the presence, of all the things in it. The silence, the knowledge of other rooms beyond this one, of the calm void beyond, and a curled moon falling like a shaving of gold towards the Weald—they all seemed strange, they seemed phenomenal.

She got out of bed and walked backwards and forwards for a little while in her dressing-gown, not thinking, staring at her big, pale feet; and feeling that shapes like quick, dark wings went and came across her eyes. Then she remembered her intention to read. There were no books in the room. She put on slippers, and left the room and passed

down the passage and the stairs, across the hall, and into the dining-room.

She lighted the gas.

The housemaid had set the table for breakfast before she left. Mrs. Jesson gazed at the wide Pompadour cups, the oak tray, the round mats, the napkins. She stepped towards a bookcase, not looking at it, looking straight before her. The curtains were not drawn over the windows, and the light pooled the gravel path and flowed to the phlox which came out in a frigid, blanched splendor.

She stopped before the books and stared at them.

Meaningless; meaningless. What was she doing here? What was it she wanted?

Her brain cleared. She read Dean Farrar's *Life of Christ*, *The Hunting of the Snark*. She used to read that to Marie. . . . How sweet Marie was as a child. . . .

She lifted her head as if adjusting a weight. Decisively she picked out Dean Farrar and pressed it against her fat side. Rapidly she went to the window and looked through a side pane at the verandah.

"I wish she wouldn't sleep out," she thought. "It's getting too late in the year."

She could just see the bed and the mounded rug. She gazed for a moment and then she returned to the door, put out the light and again entered the hall, making no sound on its carpet.

She turned the bend of the staircase. She looked up, expecting to see the narrow darkness and the less dark band of the ceiling. She felt astonished when instead of that

hollow tunnel she saw a broad, equal figure which moved down it away from her.

"That's Bessie," she thought, and she opened her mouth to call the name. But at once she restrained herself, thinking of the other sleepers. She moved more quickly.

She wondered why Bessie was out of her room. She looked at the long dressing-gown, and the arms bent and pressed to the ribs, and the gray hair hanging down smooth and straight.

"She's going to my room like she did the other night," she thought.

Then she saw Bessie pass by her door and still move on, and she knew that this supposition was wrong.

"What's she going to do?" she said, making no sound but forming the words with her lips, and for the first time she felt that there was something dreadful and unnatural in the silence, in her own presence here instead of in bed, and, most of all, in that old woman pacing, without a break in her even glide, without a movement along her stumpy form, towards the end of the passage.

She felt as if she were looking on Bessie for the first time. She was pierced by the thought that Bessie was, essentially, a stranger to her. When had she ever pondered over Bessie's reveries, endeavoring to capture the phantoms that peopled them?

"Can she be walking in her sleep?" she asked herself to escape this rigorous self-examination. She thought how Bessie had been more eccentric lately; she tried, with a sensation of supreme dread, to grasp Bessie's character, recollected fragments of sentences, united them, stared at

them, and they ebbed away, leaving her breathless and trembling as after frantic haste.

Her heart cried "Bessie," and she thought she had shouted the name aloud, and the silence and Bessie's disregard bewildered her.

She was now on the landing and she almost ran down it, stretching out her hand to grasp Bessie.

Then the old woman stopped, and, slightly turning, faced a door.

Mrs. Jesson stopped too. All her fear suddenly left her. She was amazed that she had been afraid. The familiar solid shape of that figure and profile made her want to smile at the notion that there was anything in Bessie obscure or momentous. She waited quite placidly to see what Bessie would do.

Bessie grasped the door handle and turned it.

"Why—that's Miss Baird's room," Mrs. Jesson thought. She was astounded. Why did Bessie want Miss Baird?

The sense of culpable and complete ignorance again oppressed her. She stared at Bessie in a stupefied way, receiving impressions without being driven by them to any particular emotion. She did not feel as if she were related to Bessie or Bessie's actions. She seemed to watch these things from another world; she could not, at this moment, believe that any word or movement of hers could be effectual. Thus, stupidly, she noticed that Bessie was holding something in her left hand, something small which protruded about an inch above her puffy, soft fingers; she saw Bessie open the door and enter the room.

She gazed at the spot where Bessie had been.

Then she ran down the passage, knocking her ankles together, coming against the wall and swerving from it, impelled by a terror which had no shape, which seemed to her to spring merely from the fact that Bessie had passed out of sight. She could not have said that she knew Bessie had passed into Dido's room; she felt as if an unknown blackness had engulfed Bessie, and, mingling with this feeling, confusing her terribly, was the knowledge that her heart was beating with frightful violence, was the thought that she was a wicked woman. She did not know why she thought this, but she did think so with intolerable force; she felt abased, there was a clamor of accusation and reproach against herself in her heart.

Then she reached the open door. She grasped the frame of it and stared into the room. She said "Bessie," but even to her own ears the word was not audible. She pressed her doubled hand on her heart, the book hard against her breast, and, drawing her breath in jerks, seemed to lose the power of further movement, passing into a state of intense mental clarity, feeling herself gifted suddenly with a more than human intelligence, with a calm that was more than wonderful, that was immortal and without flaw. It was like the gift of vision to a blind man. She felt as if she had whole ages to study the things which had for ever surrounded her unseen and unsuspected.

Bessie was standing by the table which was set next to Dido's bed. On either side of that table the beds stretched palely, each bearing a long, quiet body and a dark head. On the table there were two books, the little slightly shining disk of a watch, and a glass half-full of liquid.

Bessie's stern and immense eyes moved round, staring at these things. Her hands drew together, and the little object in them turned and, held only between her finger and thumb, became more definite.

"It's a bottle," Mrs. Jesson said to herself, with a dim surprise.

She watched Bessie remove the cork. Holding them both high up against her bust, Bessie looked over them at Dido.

Mrs. Jesson's hand grew rigid on the woodwork. Sentences cracked out in her head like pistol shots.

"Its a little bottle—it's—it's like the laudanum bottle."

She passed through a region of blackness, of emptiness. She made a movement with her eyelids and imagined that she must have closed her eyes because for an instant, wherein she sank into that black void, she ceased to see the room and then, the instant was over, and she saw Bessie, the beds, the table, the glass.

She mumbled to herself, fingering the wood, pressing the book into her flesh, "It's the laudanum I gave her to make her sleep."

And with that statement her unnatural calm was broken. She saw everything, there was an awful radiance somewhere—in her head, she believed; and Bessie's intention, and all that had shaped that intention, were plain to her. She couldn't move. She wanted to scream, but though her mouth was open she knew she could not produce the slightest sound.

She felt that she was horrified, that she was appalled; she listened to a voice which shouted at her that Bessie, driven quite mad by a perception of anguish in Mrs. Jesson's

heart—Mrs. Jesson whom she loved—and knowing that from Dido's presence had evolved that anguish, was attempting to poison Dido. She listened to that voice and she told herself that she must cry out, that she must seize Bessie.

Why did she stand here doing nothing? she voicelessly demanded with a surge of fury against herself.

She couldn't move. She gripped the door, and the stuff of her dressing-gown. She knew that there was a reason for her immobility; she discerned its dark, shapeless mass looming over her, and she kept silence, she kept passive, through a profound and irresistible prudence.

She saw Bessie move nearer the table and bend a little over it. Immediately she thought how Bessie would pour the stuff in, she imagined Dido drinking it; she suddenly saw with extraordinary vividness Miss Hyde coming out of the bedroom with the empty glass; she came out thus every morning; Dido always drank the lemonade.

She became violently agitated. She rolled her tongue round her mouth and looked at the room with a dehumanized and savage look. She knew now why she remained still and without sound, but the knowledge was far from the surface of her mind; it lay hideously, like a monster, in some pit, some fearful and unrealized pit of her nature. She didn't look at it; she consciously averted her eyes from it, and now she was motionless, soundless, not in response to its existence but because she dreaded making it obvious, tumultuous, not to be denied.

She saw Bessie pour some of the laudanum in the glass, and instantly her agitation passed; she felt interested and approving; she began to tell herself things in a simple, lucid

manner. Dido would drink that and she would die; then Marie could have Hob. Marie loved Hob. And he would soon forget Dido; young men were like that; he would come back to Marie.

She looked curiously and coldly at Dido's still body, at the back of Dido's head. Dido looked dead now in her stillness. But she was living, and powerful, and destructive. She had destroyed Marie's happiness. Marie loved Hob, and Dido had made that love frustrate and dreadful. If Dido were dead, Marie would be happy again; Hob would return.

Bessie had poured poison in that glass; Dido would drink it. The only thing to do was to step noiselessly away; Bessie would come away too, and at some time Dido would wake and drink that poison.

She looked at Bessie with an awful and uncertain expression. Bessie was saving her, Bessie loved her, she was giving to Marie, to Marie's mother, freedom, security.

Her body was wet with perspiration. She shut and opened her eyes. The skin of her head seemed to be creeping. She saw Bessie through flame. Bessie loomed immense and terrible and unknown before her. She tried to groan and heard only a faint shuddering "Ah" come through her open mouth; she pressed her nails through the dressing-gown into her flesh; she became engaged in a struggle without knowing what she struggled against, and it was a conflict which tore her and lacerated her; she endured throes which were like the torments of birth; her face was a convulsion.

Then she triumphed. She brought out a great cry of

“Bessie,” and the sound of her voice was to her like a peal of divine harmony. The book fell to the floor, making a dull crash as it struck the floor. She went into the room with an ecstatic consciousness of her own movements. Tears were rolling down her face, and she tasted them as she spoke. “Bessie—Bessie—what are you doing?”

Bessie had wheeled round at that first cry. She uttered a thin little scream, and stood with her arms up on either side of the huge arched round of her face as if she were about to beat off the intruder or call down some curse. Her face was as still as a lump of spongy vegetable, only her eyes burned unfathomable and living, full of determination.

“Bessie, Bessie,” Mrs. Jesson cried loudly, and grasping one of the old woman’s wrists tried to pull it down, but it was like an arm of stone; she could not move it. She looked at Bessie with horror, with love, with pity. She forgot what she had been about to do. She was suddenly sick with horror, conscious definitely of one thing alone—that she must hold Bessie; she gripped Bessie’s wrist as if she would break it.

“No, don’t,” Bessie panted in her little animal voice. “Do let me go. You don’t understand. . . .”

They looked wildly at each other as if they were hateful to each other, and they both made a violent gesture of self-defense when there was a loud creak beside them and with one movement Dido sat up in bed staring with dazed but frightened eyes at them. With another movement she was out of bed, half asleep, her ruddy face vacant but petrified, her body in an unstraightened, rigid posture.

Mrs. Jesson uttered a moan. Her grasp of Bessie remained merciless and her big body was pulled about by Bessie's struggles. She heard Bessie's squeaky, unintelligible sentences, but with no part of her mind did she attend to them; she was not even conscious that she was being shaken, pushed off, pulled close; she saw only Dido; she was pierced to the heart by the awfulness of that tall white figure; she wanted to fly; she wanted to prostrate herself, her sense of guilt was so frightful that she thought she would die through the agony of it. She could not understand how she came to be standing there alive, upright, free, before Dido.

"What is it?" Dido exclaimed in a sharp, imperative voice. She was now fully awake. She pressed her hands to the hair on her temples, drawing it away. She saw only the broad effects of the scene—not the expressions of the two women but their swaying bodies. She discerned no sense in Bessie's cries; she received only an impression of supreme fear.

"What's the matter?" she said again, almost angrily. "Has anything happened?"

Mrs. Jesson made no sound. She was frozen by the vision of her own wickedness. She wondered over it; she was losing memory of the details which had led to her position here; she forgot the scene was not ended; she thought everything was ended; it seemed to her that there remained only a silent intense contemplation of her own evilness; she could imagine no more frightful expiation than this un-lapsing contemplation of her real nature under the amazed stare of Dido's eyes.

So for an instant the scene remained obscure and stationary.

Then Bessie's high, unheeded little cries ceased. She saw that they were unheeded. She stood still.

The silence which fell had the effect of intensifying the darkness of the room. The light from the window by which they had seen each other seemed to grow less. They looked to each other's eyes like pieces of statuary, dim and near and equal. But they could hear each other breathing and the room appeared full of life; it became for that reason terrifying. Dido felt that the room was brimmed with life, bursting with contents too immense.

"Oh, what is it?" she cried almost moaningly. "What are you doing in here?"

Why didn't they speak, speak, move, act?

And all this time Hilda slept.

In a strange voice Mrs. Jesson said, "Miss Baird . . ." Then she made a convulsive movement with her fingers. She looked with anguish round the room. She shuddered so violently that the tremor of her body was almost perceptible.

"Don't say anything," Bessie cried. "Come away. Let us go away."

She leaned her body against Mrs. Jesson's, endeavoring to push her towards the door. "Don't say anything. We'll go away."

Mrs. Jesson didn't move. Now at last there was a stir in Hilda's bed. Hilda sat up with a start, her oval face and high brow hanging in the shadow haunting and pallid like a moon.

"Dido!" she called, with an accent of alarm. She wakened quickly. "What? What?" she cried, and got out of bed and came over to Dido's bed, leaning her body across it to Dido, who stood on the other side. "What's happened? Is it fire? Tell me—quickly."

She spoke in a sharp staccato voice.

"I don't know what it is," Dido said. "What *is* it, Mrs. Jesson?"

"Don't say anything," Miss Hammond cried, pushing at Mrs. Jesson's body with her own body. "Come away. Everything will be all right. We shall be safe. She won't hurt you—you'll be able to feel happy and safe. But come away. Do. Do."

"Bessie, be quiet," Mrs. Jesson shouted.

"Oh, oh," Bessie whimpered in terror.

Mrs. Jesson glared round the room, she made noises in her throat; unconsciously she grasped Bessie's arm and jerked it backwards and forwards. "Miss Baird—I can't say it—I—— Wait."

She thrust her under lip over her upper. She fought with monstrous shapes, suffocated by their pressure, ravaged by it. Words burnt her brain. She felt herself sinking away from them, she felt deadness creeping over her mind, she began to settle into soundless contemplation of this event. With an effort which was like an uprooting, giving her a sense of being torn, of enduring the anguish of mutilation, she dragged herself up, up, back to those flaming words. She shouted the first she saw.

"I can't believe it's happened. In my house. I—I don't know what I'm doing."

She looked with an appalled and amazed expression at Dido. "I ought to have thought. I ought to have seen. I shall never forgive myself. If you'd drunk it . . ."

"Drunk it!" Dido echoed the words with a cadence of incredulity.

"What say?" Hilda cried thinly at the same time.

"Don't, don't," Miss Hammond screamed. "Be quiet. Don't tell her. Do come away. We shan't be safe. We shall have to go away like I had to. Miss Wilson went. It's all my fault. But I've made up for it. Be quiet and everything will be the same again."

"Oh, Bessie, you break my heart," Mrs. Jesson cried. "If any one had told me you could do such a thing. . . ."

In an hysterical, piercing voice Hilda burst out, "She's put something in your drink, Dido!"

Dido rolled her eyes towards the glass.

"Yes," Mrs. Jesson brought out with the effect of a detonation. "Don't touch it. I'm mad—when I think. . . . Forgive us. Try and understand. . . . She don't know how wicked she is. . . . Oh, Bessie, you don't know what you've done to me," she wailed, bending her anguished eyes on Bessie.

Miss Hammond turned her head round on her humped-up shoulders; she looked at Dido, the gloom, the desolation, of her face perceptible even in the dimness.

The instant of silence was broken by a feverish movement from Hilda; she groped on the table; there were tiny noises to which they all attended in trembling suspense, and then a minute peak of light leapt up, revealing her stony and intense face with white lids dropped giving her the blind

white look of a statue. She pushed the match at the candle; they all started at the spluttering as if it were terrible; she held up the candle, her hand trembling so that it vibrated like a live thing, the yellow light flowing and fluctuating over all four faces which were seen fixed in expressions of terror as of people who found themselves living after the annihilation of all the goodness that had been deemed necessary to life, and encompassed by the corruption whose existence had seemed to make death desirable.

Hilda looked at Mrs. Jesson, her eyes full of anger under the severe, steady arch of her brows. "I don't know how you could let such a thing happen!" she exclaimed with a kind of chill, controlled energy. "You ought to look after her, knowing she's liable to have fancies and do dreadful things. I suppose you saw her come in. But if you hadn't! Dido would have drunk that lemonade. She always does. You know you always do, Dido," she said with icy force, turning her wide, outraged eyes on Dido in response to a low mutter, to an abrupt gesture. "You'd have drunk it, and you'd have died. I think it's shameful that any one capable of doing such a thing should be allowed . . ."

"Hilda," Dido implored in an intense voice. She turned her pallor, her wonder, her distress, to Hilda.

"Shameful," Hilda repeated in a loud and unnatural tone. She looked at Mrs. Jesson, her eyes very open and dark, her closed lips trembling.

Mrs. Jesson's glance wandered. Who was this speaking? she asked herself. She drew a long sigh of despair. She felt meek, she felt abject and broken before the vehement strangeness of Hilda. She wondered dimly, what had she

been doing never to see, to know, these people as they were?

Dido removed her eyes from Hilda and directed them with fright at the glass. Immediately Hilda began to speak again, with the same energy, the same firm movements of her head and hands.

"We must leave here at once," she said. "I shan't feel we're safe until we're out of this place. I think, if Dido had drunk that, I . . ."

She made a gesture of implacable vengeance.

"Hilda, Hilda," Dido urged.

"She's right," Mrs. Jesson said, her voice coming out deep and hoarse after Hilda's high clearness. "Nothing you can say—could be too bad. I deserve it all."

She looked at Dido, her head thrown back, her little eyes burning in a convulsed, terribly aged face. "When I think—of your mother—I feel . . . What I feel God only knows. I thank Him—that you'll never know. I wonder—He has not struck me down dead. . . . In my house—under my protection."

She looked at the glass.

"Don't talk like that," Dido cried. "Don't feel yourself responsible. Hilda doesn't know what she's saying. Nothing's happened. Don't blame yourself like that. I can't bear to hear you."

She extended her neck, bringing her white, excited face nearer to Mrs. Jesson. She felt as if they were all thudding against each other; the discord of their impacts, their blind, undirected impacts, was terrible to her. She felt that there existed some force which should illumine the darkness they stumbled in, so that they could meet each other in an

indestructible union. How close they all were, fighting and yet longing for union!

There was another silence. On it there grew a hurried, light sound in the passage. Of the four only Miss Hammond ignored it. The other three started and turned ghastly faces to the door. Miss Hammond didn't stir from her immobility, her despairing, sinister survey of Dido.

In the doorway stood Miss Hyde.

"Oh dear, then there *is* something the matter," she exclaimed. "I felt sure there was. I woke up and I heard voices. And I thought to myself 'Something's the matter. Some one's ill,' I thought. . . ."

"Some one might have been dead," Hilda said, her voice shaking, a spasm passing over her regular, smooth face. "Miss Hammond's been trying to poison Dido."

She indicated the glass.

"What?" Miss Hyde exclaimed.

Taking long, hopping steps, swinging her arms, she came into the candlelight. She wore a white flannelette nightgown, and her gray hair was plaited and hung down her back. Her face looked extraordinarily alive and sensitive.

Her appearance filled Dido with alarm. "Do let this end now," she said with repressed passion. "It's been averted. Don't let us be so melodramatic. Oh, don't say anything," she almost screamed at Miss Hyde. "Let it end. Throw that stuff out of the window, Hilda."

An uncontrollable shiver passed over her as Hilda handed the candle to Miss Hyde and clasped the glass. She stared fascinated at it. Death, death, she thought. Her eyes were dragged to Miss Hammond.

"Yes, come away, Bessie," Mrs. Jesson said, pulling at Bessie's arm.

Softly Miss Hyde said:

"Get into bed; you're not to faint. Now be a good girl."

Bessie dragged herself out of Mrs. Jesson's grasp. She walked, big and clumsy and subtly disquieting, over to Dido.

Without any change in her hopeless, fixed stare, without a movement of her freckled, shapeless hands, she said: "Why did you come here to bring such trouble on us? Why couldn't you leave us alone? You drove me away once, and now you drive Miss Wilson away, and you want to drive Mrs. Jesson away. What have we all done? I wish I could kill you, then you wouldn't be able to make all this sorrow—all this dreadful sorrow."

She clenched her hands on her breast. Her eyes slid round with a heartrending, dull agony towards Hilda, whose arm was stretched over the window-sill into the soft purple bloom of the night.

Dido made neither sound nor movement. She thought how her heart was beating; she thought would Miss Hammond bring down upon her throat those yellow, brown-spotted hands? And now it became impossible to look away from those hands; gazing at them loathingly, she thought with despair of Hob; she opened her dry lips to shriek to them all to move Miss Hammond; she experienced an intense terror as she suddenly understood how close Miss Hammond had been to her all the time, and she thought that life was frightful because of its concealments.

Voices, movements, the return of Hilda, the perception of Mrs. Jesson's tortured face, of Miss Hyde's steady, shining, watchful gaze and her silence, her amazing silence.

Mrs. Jesson was grasping Bessie's arm. "Come away, Bessie. Listen to me, Bessie; come with me."

"Yes, take her away," Hilda's high-pitched, hysterical voice sounded. "I can't bear to look at her. Why should she feel those wicked things about Dido? If you knew she could take these dislikes to people—without reason—why didn't you put her into a home? She oughtn't to be free. . . ."

"It's quite true, you know," Miss Hyde broke in, solemnly gazing at Mrs. Jesson. "It's what I said to-day. You remember." She turned to the cousins, "I said . . ."

"Yes, yes," Dido angrily silenced them both. "I remember."

"Why do you stop them?" Mrs. Jesson said, with an effect of violence. "I deserve it all, Miss Baird. Don't blame her; blame me. She don't know; she thinks you're the enemy who drove her away before. Eh, Bessie? But you're wrong, dear." She patted Bessie's shoulders, not looking at Bessie, looking at Dido with her eyes screwed up as though she were blinded by Dido's aspect. "She's seen I was worried, and she got muddled. She don't understand. You must go away, to-morrow."

She protruded her lips, gazing round the room as though, listening to some voice audible to herself alone, she searched for the speaker with dread, with a supreme repugnance.

"Come, Bessie," she said, making them start with her energy. She resolutely pulled Bessie towards the door.

Bessie didn't resist, she walked as if she were tranced by her despair.

"Don't worry," Dido said in a hurried and timorous voice. "We'll go away to-morrow. Please—oh, for heaven's sake don't think you're to blame; don't look like that, Mrs. Jesson. Why need you? How could any one—*any one*—blame you?"

Mrs. Jesson stopped. She vehemently pushed Bessie away from her without relaxing her hold of the old woman. She gazed at them, standing close together by the bed. She felt herself condemned to everlasting punishment; she felt cast out, worthless; she shrank before them, meekly, eagerly, exposing herself to their judgment.

"I shall never forget this night," she cried, her voice grating and uneven, "never. For the rest of my life I shall see you—a young girl—whom I have sinned against. . . . You don't know. I value"—she raised her voice, sonorously throwing it at them like a declaration before death—"I value your kindness—your thought—more—more——"

She mumbled her lips, pinching Bessie's shoulders, staring with a wild and distracted look straight before her into the shadows which massed deeply beyond the candlelight.

The three others did not move nor speak. Somberly Miss Hammond watched her. Her glance descended to Miss Hammond. With one fierce abrupt movement she dragged Bessie into the doorway. Looking as if a stony immobility had fallen upon her body, upon her brain, upon her heart, she stepped into the passage with Bessie. Her stiff arm came out, the fingers crooked. The door slammed, hiding from the eyes of the others her tragical

form and the quiet, stupefied, haunted person of her companion.

For an instant they remained suspended in their attitudes of dismay and gloom. Then Miss Hyde said:

“I’ll light the gas.”

She stepped towards the bracket, looking hushed and cautious and grave. The nightgown foamed about over quite a large circle of carpet, outspread by her long, jerky movements.

“Oh, *Dido*,” Hilda exclaimed weepingly. She threw her arms round Dido, her head bent back, her eyes dilated, her face bluish and damp. “How dreadful. That wicked old woman. To think—you’ve so nearly died.”

She began passionately to kiss Dido all over her face.

Dido did not speak; she merely linked her hands together behind Hilda’s back, thus ringing Hilda with her arms.

Now the gas was alight, Miss Hyde blew out the candle. She looked at the two girls with a tender and timid expression.

“Now you get back into bed,” she said. “Go on; both of you; into bed. Upon my word,” she lifted her chin, gazing absently about her, “to think of anything like this happening! Well!”

She had a pause of amazed contemplation. Resolutely she compressed her lips, gazing brightly and with a deep hopefulness at the cousins.

“I wish we’d never stopped here,” Hilda was exclaiming, seeming almost to beat Dido with her nervous, emphatic voice. “You so good, and so thoughtful for every one, and to be treated like this! We’ll go home to-morrow; Miss

Hyde can stop for the packing or—or I will—but you're to go; you're to go at once."

Dido smiled at her with half-closed, humid eyes. The chaos of thoughts in her head became suddenly clear, and all that was dark in them faded and a light seemed to descend gently over everything.

She thought how Hilda loved her, and she experienced an exquisite happiness, a sense of well-being. She had never before known how much Hilda loved her. She moved her eyes to Miss Hyde, and without trouble, smoothly, she received like a flood the knowledge of Miss Hyde's subdued, beautiful happiness. Miss Hyde was happy. Why? Because she found herself needed, relied on, indissolubly joined to them. How perfectly she responded to their call, repressing her desire to chatter, vigilantly watching them that she might give the essential reply, make no blunder, prove a rock and a light. Dear, dear little woman.

Closely, closely, she stood with Hilda beside Dido. Dido was loved, fiercely guarded, made secure. And to-morrow there was Hob, and mother and father.

Sorry that they had stopped! Oh, she was glad; with all her heart she was glad. She remembered her pleasure at Marie's coming. She thought how the life of the house had broken over her. No; she wouldn't have changed anything. Her excitement; Hilda's kisses, Miss Hyde's shining gaze, her profound pity and fondness for Mrs. Jesson—she wouldn't have lost them, she wouldn't have lost them. They were precious to her.

She drew her flushed, agitated face from Hilda's. She laughed.

"Now then," Miss Hyde brought out sharply, "don't you get doing that. You stop that, there's a good girl. We'll laugh to-morrow—as much as you like—but you stop that now. Go on."

Dido made a convulsive sound and then stopped. She smiled at them both. She put out her hand to Miss Hyde.

Hilda turned her head and looked at Miss Hyde. "We won't leave her for a minute until she's safely in the train, will we?" she said.

Miss Hyde shook her head; there was a bright spot of color on either of her soft cheeks. She drew near and gripped Dido's hand. She looked with ecstasy at Dido.

They stood, their bodies touching, their faces solemn but calm. Then, simultaneously, they looked at the door.

There wasn't a sound in the house.

Their heads drooped pensively. They gazed at each other with grave and regretful expressions.

CHAPTER V

ENLIGHTENMENT

WITH hurried, irregular steps Mrs. Jesson went with Bessie to her own room.

She thrust Bessie far into the room, and then returned and closed the door.

“Stay there, Bessie,” she said, frowning expressively through the darkness.

Miss Hammond remained where she had been released, a bulky figure without sign of life.

Mrs. Jesson went with the same hurried and unsteady steps to the gas bracket. She lighted the gas.

She looked round the room, turning her feverish, worn face from left to right. She felt stunned by the sameness of the room. She said to herself, “Nothing can have happened,” and she had a moment of calm, of relief, and then her gaze came to that heavy, unstimulating body, dumped down in the room, it seemed, like an image of profound, burning-eyed despair, and she saw awfully the passage, the doorway, the glass; she remembered her silence, she thundered to herself without the emission of a sound: “You wanted her to poison that girl; you were glad to see her do it. You thought how you’d go away quietly. . . .”

“Oh, Bessie,” she shouted, “how could you do such a thing! You don’t know what you’ve done to me. When I think . . .”

She jerked her hands out as if she were tearing something. She stared at the walls, seeing them immovably confining her. She wanted to run away.

No, she would never be able to outrace her knowledge. There was no region of peace, of oblivion, for her anywhere.

She advanced on Bessie as if she were about to destroy her.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Bessie piped with an accent of desolation and dread. “I did it for you—to make up. It was all my fault—all the trouble—and the friends going. We shall all have to go now. I knew I should be found out. I told you my enemy was still looking for me and you said I was safe in the middle of you all; you said no one could get at me. But they could.” Her high voice rose higher; her eyes stood far out of her head, shimmering palely. “I told you it was better I should go away, but you wouldn’t listen. You didn’t know what I knew; you wouldn’t have believed me if I’d told you. She drove Miss Wilson away. I heard her making Miss Wilson cry—I saw her come out of the room. She’d have come to you to-night perhaps. When I heard you come downstairs to-night I thought you were going to run away—leaving me. . . .”

She rolled her eyes round in her livid, motionless face; then she fixed them on Mrs. Jesson with an accusing and remorseful stare.

Mrs. Jesson listened, her own look intent and dark. Her mood changed. Now it seemed to her that Bessie had done nothing. She felt suddenly sorry for Bessie, and with

the stirring of that feeling of sorrow it appeared to her that a thick darkness fell down between her and all other human beings, cutting her off from them for ever. For her alone there was no justification; she stood isolated in her wickedness.

"There, Bessie, don't get so excited," she said slowly. "You're not to blame; all through it has been my fault. I saw nothing—I thought of nothing—but Marie—and myself. All through. . . . I never thought of you."

She gazed about her, experiencing again that peculiar feeling that something was being said to her. What was it that then rang clearly and dreadfully in her ears?

Silence, and an unending, impenetrable darkness—she found only these.

"I don't blame you, Bessie. But you must understand—do you hear, dear? You must try and understand—you must—that you're wrong. Miss Baird's not your enemy. She's never harmed you; she never would. Never, Bessie."

She passed her hand over her wet forehead and then looked in surprise at her glistening fingers. "Why didn't you tell me what you felt, Bessie? Do you think, if you'd been in danger, I'd have let you stop here?"

She looked at the wall facing her. She felt as if she were about to fall, and she blinked her eyes and shook her body. She threw off the torpor which was stealing over her mind and went on rapidly, thinking that she must say everything quickly before she sank again into that blackness, that deadness, that stiff, agonized contemplation of what she was.

"You're safe, Bessie. Nothing can harm you. Miss

Baird will go away to-morrow. Now get into bed. I'll sit by you. I shan't go to bed. I feel——”

She paused. Then she made an abandoning motion with her hands. “I can't go to bed. But you'll be ill, dear. Get in now, for my sake. Ah!”

Clasping Bessie's hands, she found that Bessie was still holding the laudanum bottle. She shuddered, staring at it with a ghastly look. She pulled open Bessie's hand so that the bottle fell to the ground.

“Get into bed, Bessie,” she said harshly.

Without a word, with as few movements as possible, Bessie did so. She lay down with an appearance of instinctive prudence.

“I'm so sorry,” she whispered. “Do forgive me. I do love you so, and it made me feel so bad, seeing you frightened and . . .”

“Oh, Bessie, I don't forget that you did it because you loved me. I shall never forget that. I've said you're not to blame. It was I—in my mother-love, in my jealousy—my wicked jealousy—I'm guilty. I know. Don't be afraid I don't love you, Bessie. Try and forget it. Try and help me by keeping still and quiet and believing me—when I say your fancies were wrong.”

“Yes, I will,” Bessie faintly breathed.

She looked gently at Bessie. Then her gaze wandered, becoming perplexed and vague.

She felt that some fresh thing tormented her, and she could have moaned with weak misery because she could not name it. She had an instant of black staring, and then she cried to herself, “The light. The light.” She could

not endure the light, which left nothing in shadow, which fell on her with a blinding and callous glare.

She put out the gas.

Through the darkness she groped her way back to the bed and sat down in a chair between it and the door. She leant back in the chair, her hands doubled on her knees, her wide-open eyes staring straight ahead. She could hear Bessie's repressed, uneasy breathing.

She saw the passage, the doorway, the glass. "I'd have let her do it. I wanted to go away without stopping her. I wanted Miss Baird to die."

It seemed to her that ages passed while she looked at these truths. She saw Dido's face, and she remembered how she had hated that face; she recalled, shuddering, her fury against Dido.

"O God, I'm a wicked woman," she mumbled, and she thought, with a convulsive crooking of her fingers, that God was looking at her now. "How did I ever get into such a dreadful state?" she asked herself, shrinking down in the chair as she imagined that sad, grave, awful scrutiny.

"It's all through my love—all through my love for Marie."

Now it was as if a great, white, and implacable luster lay upon all her actions, upon her heart, and upon the actions, the hearts, of the others in the house.

She had thought only of Marie and herself. She gazed at the thoughts, the emotions, the dreams, the fears, which had filled her during the past weeks, and she saw with what savage and ruthless fervor she had centered herself

on Marie, thrusting the others away from her, hating them because they intervened, denying the right, the necessity, of any one to live, to enjoy, but Marie, Marie, Marie.

She sat up violently, her heart crying the name with an endless and wild reiteration, crying it, not in love, but in terror as something which had ruined her, which had flung her out into vast disorder and solitude beyond the pity of humans or the mercy of God.

“My love’s made me wicked. I’ve remembered only that I was a mother and forgotten that I was a woman. A love—which could drive me to hate that girl—enough—to want her death—O Lord, I’ve loved wrongly. I’ve sunk—and I didn’t know I was falling. All through—wrong—terribly wrong.”

This thought was so awful that she tried to refuse it; she summoned Marie’s face—she cried voicelessly, “She’s mine; why should I care about the others?” And then she saw the shadowy room and the two beds and her own soundless, eager figure. She shrank back, she cowered down before the livid shape of Dido’s mother; she saw all the faces turned to her, Dido, Hilda, Miss Hyde; she felt the stir, the murmur, of a great multitude beyond—all the lives, all the unknown, unrealizable lives. She was only one; she wasn’t pre-eminent, Marie wasn’t pre-eminent. Why should everything have been demanded for Marie? How dared she ignore the claims, the right, of those other existences, asserting her need and Marie’s need clamorously, asking an empty world wherein Marie might move freely?

She rested against the chair-back, breathing heavily, her mouth open, but her eyes closed.

She longed for forgetfulness, but she could not forget; she could not cease thinking. She thought without pause, with a lacerating vividness. All things seemed so bright, so relentlessly clear, but it was an evil brightness, an awful clarity.

Marie was right. Her love had been selfish. "Ought not a mother do all she can for her child?" she asked then, and she was crushed by the knowledge that motherhood was but one of many states of life and that each state must recognize the existence of the others, must acknowledge the equality of all, must express itself conformably with the rights, the exigencies, of those others.

She had been mother only. When, or how deeply, had she thought of her state of responsibility towards Bessie? When had she remembered that any action or word or glance of hers might affect the lives of those around her, acknowledging her duty towards her fellow-creatures, submitting herself to the restraints, the obligations, of her humanity? There came before her the faces of her sisters, and she admitted, with a deepening of her hate and contempt for herself, that her sisters had appeared to her only as supporters and sympathizers. "What they'd give me and do for me," she said, "not what I'd do for them."

And then all the new pictures and recollections vanished. She saw the bedroom and Dido's face, and Hilda's.

She experienced again the amazement, the bewilderment, which had risen in her when Hilda vehemently attacked her. She opened her eyes and stared into the blackness; she

sucked her lips, trying to create a new sensation to escape from that sensation of deep pain which made her body seem to her to be one immense mystic wound.

But she could not check her thoughts. She demanded with unconquerable irritation when had she ever considered Hilda as a personality? how could she know Hilda? She hadn't seen her as a being with passions and desires and intentions of her own. She'd only seen her as something set there to receive complaints and thanksgivings and incertitudes, something afterwards to be forgotten; a piece among the furniture of earth set around herself and Marie.

She straightened her shoulders, moving her hands helplessly on her knees. "She loves Miss Baird," she muttered, and at once, as if there had been something fresh and devastating in her words, she trembled and gazed round the room in supplication, with inward moans asking to be spared further enlightenment.

But knowledge followed the movement, and she looked round at the bed and the just-perceptible round mass of Bessie's head.

"Oh, love," she thought, convulsively shaking with despair over the word, almost with hatred of it; "Bessie loved me."

Love, love, her brain repeated, sending a shock through her with each repetition. She had said only mothers loved. Then, gazing at the darkness and the hollow of the window and the stars burning with light throbs, she brooded over Hilda's love for Dido, over Bessie's love for herself, over Dido's strange unbearable look of love at herself.

And she felt herself diminish. Vast, majestic, and su-

preme shapes rose round her, and she looked up at them in fright and abject wretchedness; shapes of being swayed by loves that were not maternal, but which were strong despite that, effectual and enduring.

She had thought no one loved like her, that no mother felt as she did, that she was magnificent and royal through her motherhood.

“O Lord, I’m a wicked woman,” she muttered, and pressed her hands on her temples. “I loved her to the forgetfulness of all else. I’ve forgotten—all my other duties. I’ve hated—my fellow-creatures. I’ve thought I—and she—were the only ones—that counted—in the world.”

Words struggled up to her through storm and dark and confusion.

“The dearest idol I have known. . . . Help me to tear it from my heart. . . .”

“Oh, *Marie*,” she groaned, and tears ran down her face; she gasped, torn by her efforts to repress her sobs; recollection of Bessie, of those others in the room near hers, stabbed through her, forcing her to impose on herself a restraint that was an agony.

She covered her face with her hands. They must return to America, they must, they must. She couldn’t stay here.

She thought of America as of a refuge where she could hide, effacing herself, amid contours which, in her excitement, she imagined as unaware of her dreadfulness, harmonious, and touched with light.

She thought that upon the three hills, upon the odorous, rank spaces of the Weald, upon the lanes, and upon the

woods, lay the shadow of her tyrannical and destructive love, the love which had brought her to the limits of madness—a shadow ineffaceable and foul, which no eye might see but which her own heart would see, knowing the country marred for ever.

CHAPTER VI

THE MOTHER—THE WOMAN

THE still, earth-scented night gave place to a morning without wind, mild, and veiled in thin fogs which, irradiated by the sun, seemed to rise like a golden steam, hanging stirless, dim, under the fog-like pallor of the sky.

Mrs. Jesson had, in the small hours, got into bed beside Bessie. She had slept towards morning.

At eight o'clock she awoke.

She looked quietly at the ceiling, at the walls, at the window. She became aware of Bessie sleeping beside her.

"What?" her mind rapped out in surprise. "What's this?" and she looked at Bessie wonderingly.

Then she remembered.

She closed her eyes and lay without motion, tasting the bitterness of knowledge, feeling the waves of her immense sadness roll upon her, pressing her down, concealing the light of day, the beauty, the peace.

She suddenly became resolute and rebellious. "No, no, you mustn't," something shouted at her. "The dreadful thing's been averted. Now you've got to atone. You mustn't give way. You mustn't think of yourself, but of others. You've got to be well—and sane—and calm because of the others. Remember Bessie—and those girls—and Marie. Get up. Get up."

With one movement of her body she sat up in bed. She looked down at Bessie.

"I mustn't show my sorrow," she told herself, "or Bessie will get wild again."

She became momentarily confused and depressed by the thought of those other existences. She feared with an access of dread that she might fail them. What was asked of her? She felt that she could not say. She imagined that Bessie and Dido and Hilda were calling out to her to do something, and the thought that she couldn't understand them distracted her. Her irritated, wan stare moved round. She mustn't fail them. An immense pity for them stirred in her.

"That poor girl—what she must be feeling now," she said, and she became full of desire to go to Dido; she imagined herself holding Dido's hands, looking tenderly and meekly in her face, soothing her.

Then she perceived that she was not thinking of Marie, and she was amazed and perplexed. She thought that she must be doing wrong. Marie was her child. Ought she not to come first?

She felt herself sinking into the heart of those rending terrors and doubts. Quickly but carefully she got out of bed. She mustn't waken Bessie.

She began to dress, staring at her clothes, thinking this shoe went on this foot, this button in here, this tape and this were to be tied.

There was a soft stir on the stairs. Her fingers grew still; she fixed her eyes on the door; her heart began to palpitate violently; everything was cleared out of her brain; it seemed to wait, empty and dark, for some storm which would burst upon it, for some light which should fill it.

The door opened gently and Marie's rough head and broad, reddened face and sparkling eyes appeared.

"Oh, you are up," she exclaimed and came in. Holding the door she stood still, smiling at her mother with a look of thought and consideration.

Mrs. Jesson smiled back and her smile was not forced. It came, involuntarily and sweet, on the deep, easing impression of Marie's beauty, her health, and energy. The darkness seemed to thin; her heart-beats grew calmer. She gazed timidly and submissively at Marie, bathing herself in the light kindled simply by Marie's presence.

"What on earth's Bessie doing in here?" Marie exclaimed. She spoke afterwards in a lower voice. "I was just making for the bathroom." She bent her head, examined her finger-nails, and then looked again at her mother with kind, contented eyes. "Will you be sensible if I tell you something?" she said. "You'll have to know some time to-day. I hope it won't blight you."

She glanced away, her flat mouth smiling very much, her glance full of triumph and seeming to diffuse a brilliant, powerful light over everything. She suddenly laughed, repressing her laughter through her remembrance of Bessie, but quivering in her dressing-gown with a seductive and vigorous effect.

"Weep now, that we may have the red eyes and nose as early as possible," she said, merrily watching her mother. "You're to be beautified later. Jimmy asked me to marry him that night on Hirst Hill, and I told him I'd think about it. I wrote to him yesterday to say I would, so he'll be round to-day. Do be as sensible as you can over it."

She looked joyously, absently, round the room. "I don't want to be treated like a lamb offered up for the sacrifice. He adores me, and——"

She burst out laughing again. "I shall have my own way in everything."

She paused, lightly rocking the door, gazing at her mother without appearing to see her.

"Marie," Mrs. Jesson cried, with an indefinable intonation.

"B-r-r!" Marie waved her off. "Orthodox congratulations, warnings, prophecies—the Whole Duty of Woman—terrible! Give them to Bessie. I'm bathing now. Later on I'll tell you what to say to Jimmy. If you follow me now my curse shall be on you for ever."

Bending her head in laughter she went out, bringing her feet down firmly, shaking, with pride and confidence, her broad shoulders.

Mrs. Jesson found herself gazing at the closed door.

She made a movement towards it and then checked herself. She clenched her hands, her eyes darting from side to side.

"Oh, oh," she brought out hoarsely.

She bit her lips without feeling the pressure of her teeth. "Jimmy," she shouted to herself, and heard a mad whisper going on in her head, the endless, senseless, furious repetition of the name. Again she jerked towards the door, and was checked, was struck, by its stupid, dull, unaltering stare.

"She'll have Jimmy," she muttered, ceasing to see the door. "He'll be her husband."

She uplifted her head, her expression strained, as she recalled Jimmy's face.

Now her despair became measureless. Her head remained

stiffly upright, but she felt beaten down, crushed, beyond hope of reanimation. The last sorrow had fallen upon her.

"All through my life—as a mother—I've looked forward to this day when—she should tell me . . ."

She turned her head from side to side, wildly seeking for some confirmation of the truth of the denial which, full of rage, her mind thundered at her. It wasn't true. It couldn't be. The supreme moment of her life to come upon her—*thus!*

All her dreams of this moment, her agitated and yet pleased dreams, her intentions, the things she had expected to say, the caresses she had felt she would give and receive, the profound thanksgiving she had thought would fill her, the sense of relief, the perception of a greater fear, a greater ecstasy to come than had ever yet been—she remembered them all. She set them against the reality of this moment.

In her lividness she gave out a faint, vibrating "Ah!" She wondered over the reason for her existence. She thought that to make a woman a mother was to inflict upon her the supreme, the unpardonable wrong.

"She's going to have that man after all," she said, driving the words into her heart as if with each she dealt herself a mortal wound.

"On Hirst Hill," she continued, trying to understand what these words meant. "And she wrote and told him yesterday."

Yesterday. She angrily rubbed her forehead with her knuckles, frowning at the floor with a feverish, exasperated expression.

"She'd answered him when I—when——"

She couldn't go on. She stood frozen, blinded, by the

knowledge that she might have thrust a life out of Marie's way to find afterwards that the life was not an obstacle. She saw herself gazing at Dido's long, still body, fixed there with it, and Marie boldly, lightly, receding away from her along another and unimpeded path.

This scene was blotted instantly out of her mind. She looked instead curiously, intently, at Marie's figure, at Jimmy's. A light, faint but steady, beamed down to her. Marie would be married. May. She made an approving, joyous movement of her hands. No need to fear May. She cast a stealthy, bewildered look under her eyelids. Then—marriage; Marie would be safe then; she would be a wife.

With shrinking, with incredulity, with an inexplicable and painful joy, she bent over Marie, seeing Marie in bed wearing a strange, bright, stern expression. She saw Marie with a child. Wifehood; motherhood; security.

She raised her eyes, revealing them to be puzzled and naïve. She couldn't say whether she was happy or desolate.

She plucked at the lace of her camisole. Unconsciously she turned and gazed out of the window.

Looking at the gray fields, and the forms of some cows moving slowly in one through the smudged yellow air, she felt an inexorable and shattering message disengage itself from those flats, those pale rises, those mounded woods, and, penetrating like a cry, reach her and sink down into her heart.

America. She would not be able to return to America. They would stop here. Marie would live here with her husband, and wherever Marie was she must be.

For evermore she was fixed here.

She looked hurriedly at the fields, the immovable hills.

Her knees began to tremble; she drew a long, difficult breath.

England, Jimmy, memory.

She ceased to see the country; she forgot what had happened, what was happening; she lost the sense of time and imagined that it was the day Henry had died; she was quite certain death was near; but she was living; that was what was so terrible; everything dead and she living.

Slowly she grew perceptive again. "Never mind," she said to herself very gently and compassionately. "While I have her . . ."

While she had Marie! She hadn't her, she never would have her; never. She saw herself following Marie, a dogged, hopeless, unacknowledged figure traversing long tracks of time, passing through numberless states of emotion, incorruptible, not to be driven away, but always within sight only of Marie, never within touch; always having nothing, and knowing a deep and unlesening desire.

Her face grew distorted; she saw merely the film of her tears.

The bed creaked. Instantly she was alert. She thought with frantic haste of the others, all the others. Their names, their faces, whirled in her head. She squeezed her lids together so that her tears were flattened to her eyelashes and did not fall to her cheeks. She thought with terror of Dido. Dido's need to be considered, the protection Dido asked of her, seemed to her immense and pre-eminent.

She composed her face. She smiled. With that composed face, that smile, she turned and went to Bessie.

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